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by
S·A·WHITE

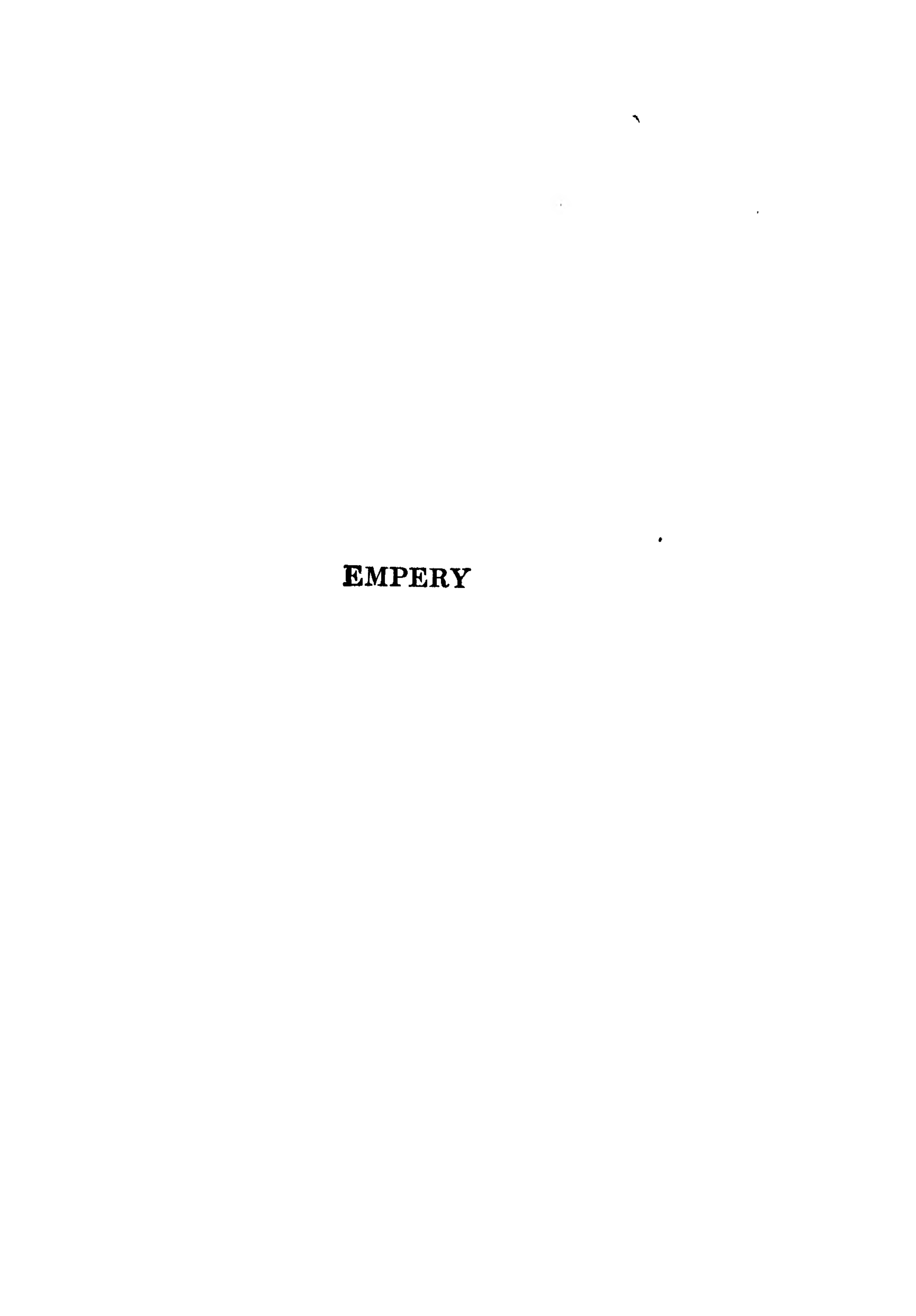
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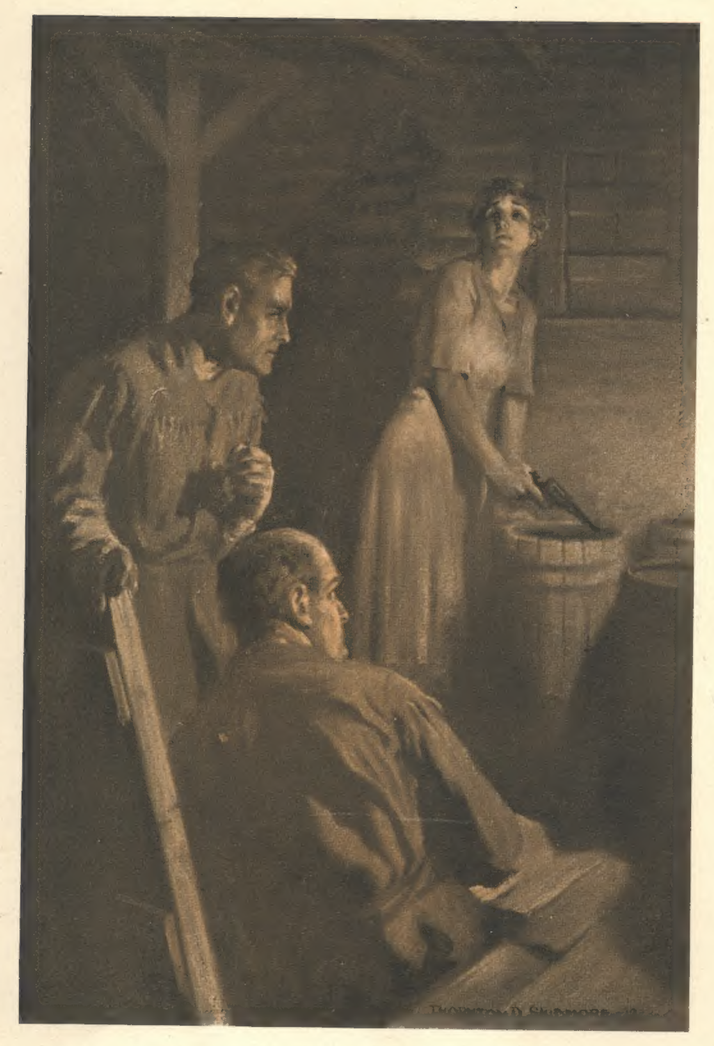


By SAMUEL A·WHITE

Richard McKee.



EMPERY



THE PRIEST NOTED THE WEAPON'S MUZZLE
THRUSTING DEEPER INTO THE POWDER

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EMPERY

A Story of Love and Battle in Rupert's Land

BY

SAMUEL A. WHITE

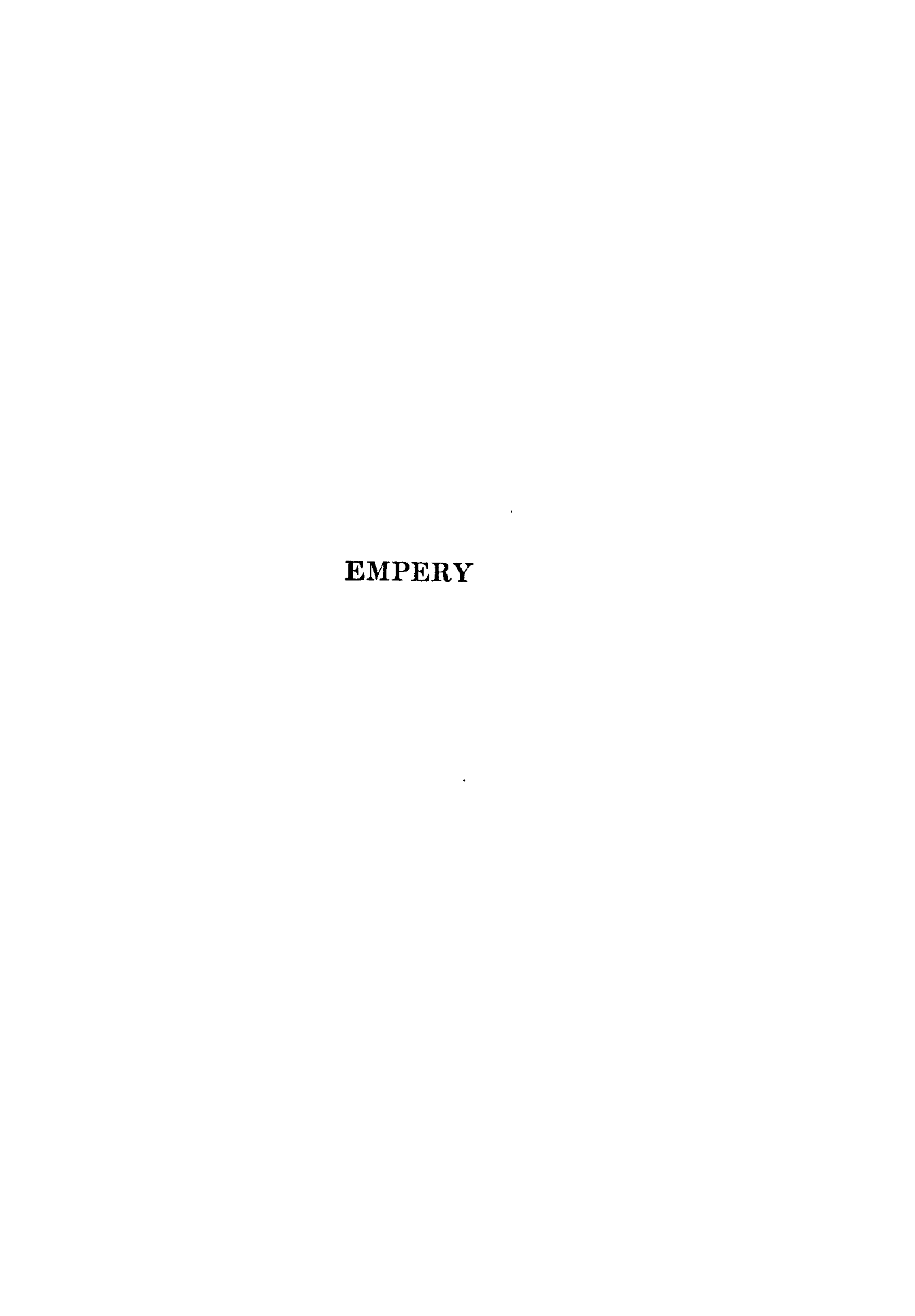
AUTHOR OF "THE WILDCATTERS," "THE STAMPEDERS," ETC.

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CHAPTER I

THE BREED OF THE NORTH

BEFORE Basil Dreaulond, the Hudson's Bay Company's courier, had won half the mile-long Nisgowan portage, the familiar noise of men toiling in pack-harness reached his ears. He stopped automatically and trained his hearing in mechanical analysis of the sound. This power had grown within him with every successive year of his wilderness life, and at once he was aware that a party of considerable size was packing across the boulder-strewn strip of woodland separating Kinistina Creek from Lac Du Longe.

The knowledge gave a wonderful quickness to the courier's rigid, listening figure. Swinging the canoe from his bulky shoulders, he hid it swiftly in the tamarack thicket

which skirted the blazed passage. The tumpline was as suddenly slipped from his sweating forehead, and the pack-sack vanished likewise. Then Dreaulond himself disappeared with a spring into the green growth like a grouse seeking tangled cover. From the place of concealment sounded a metallic clink as he made ready his weapons against the chance of discovery.

The voyageur was doubtful whether the advancing men were from any of the Hudson's Bay forts. They might well belong to some of the Northwest Fur Company's posts. If this were the case, Basil knew it would not be conducive to his own safety or, what was more important, to the welfare of the dispatches he carried to encounter single-handed a body of Nor'westers. He made for his convenience a peep-hole among the pungent boughs and scrutinized the axe-hewn path where one had to stagger knee-deep among flinty rock fragments, spear-like stumps, and a chaotic jumble of logs.

Stooping to their burdens of canoes, dunnage, and arms, they came, thick-set giants

with the knotted muscle, the clear vision, and the healthy skin that the strenuous northland life bestows. While they approached slowly, footing arduously, almost painfully, every step of the trying way and guarding against slips which meant fractures or six-month bruises, Dreaulond caught mingling gleams of color about their attire. As these bright glints took on definition and were resolved into sashes and leggings of red and blue, the hiding courier made out the dress of his own Company's men. The cover, now no longer necessary, was brushed aside for a better view. In the lead he recognized the square shoulders and mighty breadth of Bruce Dunvegan from Oxford House, a man of superior education and chief trader to Malcolm Macleod, the Factor.

When Dunvegan with his hardy brigade of voyageurs came abreast the courier's shelter, Dreaulond was seized with a sudden spirit of humor, and launched a long-drawn, far-carrying cry.

"*Vive le Nor' westaire!*" he bellowed.

As automatons, actuated by a single con-

trolling spring, the men dropped whatever they bore and leaped to shelter behind perpendicular rocks, huge logs, or bullet-proof stumps, only the ends of their rifles showing grim and suggestive in silent menace. The discipline of defense which fell upon them naturally without preconcerted thought, without volition, was pleasing to a man who loved his Company's interests as did Dreaulond. His eyes sparkled with satisfaction, although he was minded to keep up the artifice a little longer.

"La Roche! *Pour* La Roche!" he shouted, using the watchword of the Nor'-westers, the customary warning of dire and imminent trouble for Hudson's Bay followers. While Basil raised the enemy's alarm, he rolled quickly behind a jutting boulder, thereby protecting himself from any serious consequences that might follow his daring joke.

Dunvegan's acute ear distinguished the rustling movement. A vivid tongue of flame leaped out of the shade from his rifle's muzzle, and the missile, twanging sharply

through the branches, smote Dreaulond's shielding granite with a wicked thud. Following their leader's cue, the men let loose a volley which filled the forest with uproar. Twigs whitened instantly to the bullet-scars. Chipped rocks split with a pop and scuffled through the underbrush. Dreaulond chuckled dryly.

"Hol' on dere, M'sieu's," he advised. "Kip dat good powdaire."

"Who speaks?" shouted Dunvegan, the chief trader.

"Basil Dreaulond," came the laughing answer. "He wan fren', *aussi.*"

Dunvegan knew the voyageur's voice, and he and his band quitted their cover.

"Come out, Basil," he ordered. "What trick are you playing now?"

The courier's face, a clean-cut mask of brown cunning, grinned at them from the fringing tamarack.

"You be waste dose balls," he laughed. "Who you t'ink eet was? Black Ferguson, of de Nor'westaires, mebbe?"

"You rascal," reproved Dunvegan,

"your jokes will some day get you a roasting over the wrong fire."

"*Non!* I tak' de good care of maself. Black Ferguson an' hees men dey don' catch me wit' ma eyes shut."

He stepped forth from his hiding place, a swart, sinewy son of the North, spawn of the wilderness, fit to face hazard and court risk in a land where danger rode round with the sun.

A single glance of the courier's shrewd eyes took in every member of the group before him. One face was strange. Between tall Maskwa, the Ojibway fort runner and the most trusted Indian in the service, and Wahbiscaw, the Cree bowsman, stood the alien. Just the fraction of a minute Basil puzzled over him, then flashed his friendly grin at all his old friends.

"*Bo' jou', bo' jou',*" he greeted, in the northland fashion.

"*Bo jou',* Dreaulond," they returned. "Good journey?"

"*Oui,*" responded the courier. "I have no troubl' wit' de Nor'westaires. Dey too

mooch busy get ready for de wintaire trade, mebbe."

"You've come over from Nelson House, have you?" questioned Bruce Dunvegan.

"*Vraiment,*" Basil answered, tapping the dispatch packet at his belt. "W'at you doin'?"

"Three things," the chief trader enumerated; "drafting a clerk from Norway House, selecting a site for a new post to hold Fort La Roche in check, and spying upon it and the other Northwesters' forts in hopes of locating Macleod's daughter. We haven't succeeded in placing her yet."

At which information Dreaulond's twinkling eyes assumed an expression of deepest gravity.

"Ba gosh, dat's fonny t'ing," he commented. "You hunt an' not find. I find wit'out huntin'. I see dat girl in de Cree camp on de Katchawan."

"What?" Dunvegan cried in great surprise. "She is in Running Wolf's camp? What foolery is that? Is Black Ferguson with her there?"

"*Non,* she be alone," the courier declared. "W'at she doin' I don' know. W'en I try learn dat, she lak wan speetfire, yes! She have de mission education an' talk lak *diable.* She goin' have de Crees t'row me out de camp. I kip quiet den! You goin' see her?"

"At once!" exclaimed the chief trader, who, seemingly impelled by a sudden feverish unrest, gave swift, tart orders to his men to take up their burdens. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Dat for tell de Factor," Basil chided. "I no spik de idl' word lak wan old *femme.* How I know you be huntin' de girl?"

"That's true," admitted Dunvegan. "You couldn't know our errand. I am somewhat over-anxious, Basil, being in a hurry to finish this hunt and return to Oxford House."

"I believe dat," confided Dreaulond, with meaning in his smile. "*Mais,* who dis new clerk?"

The chief trader turned to his voyageurs, now shouldering their loads and passing off in single file.

"Glyndon," he called, "come over. This is Basil Dreaulond, the Company's finest courier. You may have heard of him at Norway."

"Indeed, yes," Glyndon confirmed, losing his slight, well-formed hand in Basil's huge paw. "I heard him named with honor and with admiration."

"Ha! dat easy t'ing to say!" exclaimed Dreaulond. "You be Engleesh? You not for ver' long out?"

"I arrived from England on the last ship," Glyndon responded. "They told me there wouldn't be another for a year." He laughed ingenuously, as if at something strangely outside his own experience.

"The vessel comes but once in twelve months," explained Dunvegan, "to bring supplies and carry back the furs to market. We get our yearly mail with the supplies."

"It seems very odd," the clerk ventured. "This is a tremendous country, and I have everything to learn about it. Perhaps Dreaulond will teach me the elementals!"

"At Oxford House he may," remarked

the restive chief trader. "You can renew the acquaintance there. Just now we have something more important to do."

"At Oxford House, then," Glyndon concluded as he followed the rest of the brigade.

Dreaulond brought forth his canoe and pack-sack from the thicket. Before loading up he gazed shrewdly after the slender figure of the English clerk. He had not missed the lines of the aristocratic face; the large, hazel, womanish eyes; the cheek-marks of dissipation that even a lately-acquired tan failed to conceal.

"Dey send heem out?" Basil asked, pointing his arm in a direction designed to extend across the Atlantic.

"Yes," answered Dunvegan, "his folks sent him here. He drank at home, and they want the Company to make a man of him. New environment! The primeval law of adaptation!

Dreaulond adjusted the tump-line and placed the canoe upon his shoulders.

"*Au revoir!*" he called.

"*Au revoir,*" echoed the chief trader.

Basil bobbed on over the rough portage, pondering on Glyndon as he went.

"Hees eyes too soft," was his conclusion. "Mooch too soft for dis beeg *Nord!*"

CHAPTER II

THE LODGE IN THE WILDERNESS

DUNVEGAN lifted the flap of the Cree wigwam and knew that the third of his missions was ended. Within the primitive tepee on a pile of rabbit-skin blankets sat Flora Macleod, the Factor's fugitive daughter. Her personal appearance bordered on the squalid, for toilette necessaries were lacking in the tent. Her eyes shone defiantly into the chief trader's, glinting dark like her coal-black hair.

Altogether, Bruce thought her somber eyes and swarthy skin held but little difference from those of the Indians who ruled these lodges on the Katchawan. To her breast she hugged a bundled infant whose

blue eyes and fair skin bespoke its white fathering.

"What brought you here?" she demanded, with an almost ferocious abruptness.

"You," answered Dunvegan. "You and the boy. Your father will have you wife to no Nor'wester. Nor will he have his daughter's son bear a Nor'wester's name. He intends giving the babe his own——"

"He does?" Flora interrupted, the glow in her eyes flaming till they blazed with anger.

"Yes. As for you—I cannot say. We all know the Factor is a stern, hard man."

"I will never go back to his punishment."

Dunvegan's face hardened. "You must! I am under orders to take you at any cost; and there are the means!" His brown, muscled hand indicated the canoe brigade nosing the serrated river bank and filled with his sinewed northmen whose combined might seemed quite sufficient to carry away bodily the pole and skin structures which made up the Cree camp.

"You coward!" exclaimed the girl malignantly, releasing her neck from its attitude of craned inspection and hushing the child's sudden whimper. "You are both cowards, you and the one who sent you. You slip in here with a score of voyageurs while the men are away after caribou. I say you are nothing but a coward, Bruce Dunvegan!"

The chief trader's handsome face flushed to a deeper tint under its bronze, but he kept his patience.

"Hardly that," he objected. "We happened to meet Dreaulond, the Company's courier, on the Nisgowan portage, and he told me of your whereabouts. I was glad of the meeting, since this brigade has been searching for a long while, and in these bitter times the posts have need of all their men. However, there was no secret about our coming; in fact, we shall not dip a paddle till Running Wolf returns. The Company cannot afford to lose the trade of his tribe through any real or fancied offense in taking you away."

"Dreaulond told you," Flora Macleod repeated spitefully. "He has an old woman's tongue. Basil Dreaulond is a gossip!"

"No," declared the chief trader, "he talks wisely when he talks at all, and many an act of justice follows his words on the trail. He wondered, though, at seeing you in the lodge of Running Wolf. What has Black Ferguson, a Nor'wester, to do with our Indians?"

"Nothing," snapped the girl. "He deserted me here."

"Ah!" Dunvegan exclaimed. "I thought as much. But you were legally married?"

"Father Merceraux, the Nor'west priest, married us."

Bruce's face brightened. "That's good. I know Merceraux. So there could have been no trickery. You have a copy of his register?"

"Yes," answered Flora. "I treasure that—and the child."

"So will the Factor," Bruce observed.

The daughter frowned at the repeated mention of the grim one who would pronounce judgment on her for disobeying his orders. " I hate him," she declared; " I hate——"

" Stop! " interrupted Dunvegan harshly. " I don't want your confidences. And take a little advice from me. Don't set your spirit up against his. I know him—perhaps better than you. I myself rather fear to tell him of your desertion."

" Fear! " exclaimed Flora, her glance running over Dunvegan's massive, six-foot frame. " You never felt it. But let Malcolm MacLeod take care. I have power here. Running Wolf wishes me to stay. The tribe I can twist like a river weed. And the Nor'west Company is very active in gaining ground. So let the lord of Oxford House consider. I can stir up trouble for him."

Gazing at the defiant daughter, Bruce did not doubt her ability for provoking mischief. Flora Macleod had not that perfection of womanly beauty which makes

abject slaves of men, but she possessed what is perhaps a greater gift. She had inherently a natural authority, a mastery, a fire of conquest which enabled her to subordinate many minds to a single dominance. This was her most apparent talent, not wasting in concealment but growing to supremacy through the frequency of its use. And here, Dunvegan knew, she would not scruple in the using if the dour Factor forced her to extremities.

"Why does Running Wolf wish you to stay?" he asked.

"Superstition," Flora replied, and she laughed contemptuously. "They have had hard hunting and game has been scarce. They think I'll change their luck. And, more than that, Running Wolf hopes I may some time marry him——"

"Marry him!" echoed the chief trader. "Are you crazy? Or is he?"

"He is," Macleod's daughter responded with harsh merriment. "He wants to get the Factor's permission." Her voice was bitterly contemptuous.

Dunvegan frowned blackly. "If he mentions that to Macleod he will raise a storm with speech for thunder and blows for lightning. You are Black Ferguson's wife. That fact cannot be got over."

"He got over it," snapped Flora.

"And why?" demanded the chief trader. "There must have been a reason. Surely his wooing and marrying was more than a simple whim to thwart Macleod. Surely there was a reason, and a good one, for this swift divorce!"

"There was," admitted Flora grimly. Her eyes burned up into Dunvegan's with fierce irony. "A good reason. He set eyes on your own ideal."

"My own ideal!" exclaimed Dunvegan, making a poor pretence of ignorance. "I hardly catch your meaning."

"No?" Flora sneered. "Paddling down Lake Lemeau, as we hunted, who did we encounter but Desirée Lazard, with her Uncle Pierre and his men. Desirée Lazard, you understand! The ripest beauty of Oxford House, the breaker of Hudson's Bay

hearts, and the very idol of one Dunvegan." Flora's harsh, grating chuckle, seeming to come more from the dark, unfathomable eyes than from the thin-lipped mouth, held the essence of taunt.

At the pointedness of her speech Bruce Dunvegan's tanned skin took on a deeper flame of red even than that caused by her charge of cowardice. He could not well retort, but as his fingers involuntarily clenched he wished a man had done the baiting.

"Desirée's beauty struck him suddenly and blindingly, like the morning sun over the Blood Flats," the girl went on, more impersonally. "I give Desirée her due! No northman has ever looked upon her unmoved, and Ferguson is the most beastially susceptible of them all. She was like red wine in his eyes. I think if he had had a few more paddlers he would have attacked Pierre Lazard's men with the idea of carrying her away by force."

"Didn't Lazard attack him?" cried the chief trader. "He reported sighting and

chasing the Nor'wester; and Pierre does not lie."

"Nor I," returned Flora Macleod—"when there is no need! Pierre feared our small party was but in advance of a Nor'-west force and hung off on guard and ready for a skirmish. When he found that nothing was following our three canoes he did give chase, but we were lightly loaded, and left them easily. However, the mischief was done. Ferguson desired Lazard's niece as he had desired no other thing in all his life. My release came that night in camp. Black Ferguson and his paddlers were gone before I awoke in the morning. So I came here for shelter."

"Damnation to his black heart!" exclaimed Dunvegan. "Is there nothing of the man about this Nor'wester? Had he no thought of your rights and the rights of the child?"

The Factor's daughter flung a gesture of the arms riverward, a motion vindictive in the extreme. "I," she averred, "was a cast-off rag. The boy was nothing more. You

know Ferguson has no heart—only impulse. He appears to have gone mad over Desirée Lazard."

"Much good it will do him if we have our hands on him!"

"But what if you haven't?"

"We can trust Desirée at the fort."

"Perhaps. But, remember, one person at Oxford House made trysts and kept them in spite of guards and gates."

Bruce smiled grimly. "And her reward?" he asked, and cursed himself instantly because of the pain that momentarily changed the girl's expression. He had, as it were, a glimpse of her soul in that moment and knew that for all her waywardness she was inwardly true. Blessed with a more merciful environment, she would doubtless have been a transformed woman.

"Watch Desirée well," she warned. "Black Ferguson is hard on her trail, and she is too fine to be lorded by such a beast."

Dunvegan paced some awkward steps before the Cree tents, his glance wander-

ing uncertainly to the waiting brigade by the Katchawan's bank.

"I haven't the right," he complained.

"Win it," she flashed. "You are the pick of the Company's men. If you weren't you would not be Malcolm Macleod's chief trader."

"She is a Nor'wester at heart. Her father died in their service, and his spirit is in her. She cherishes his pride of allegiance. Desirée vows she will never wed a man of the H. B. C. Her vow stands!"

"Tut!" mocked Flora. "A woman's whim easily changed! She stays under the Company's roof with her uncle, a servant of the same organization. Does that fit in with her vow? A fig for such vows!"

"She has no other relative and no place else to live," asserted the chief trader. "As for her resolve, it is proof against changing, for I—have tested it."

"Then," observed Macleod's daughter, "the Nor'wester has a good chance of marrying her. Here are the Cree men coming back!"

Over the ridge which rimmed the camp with a rampart of spruce the Indians dropped, one by one, bounding lightly from rock to rock in noiseless buckskins. They threaded the birch belt and crossed the cedar "slash," swung around the long beaver meadow below, and emerged upon the flat river point supporting their camp. The chief trader saw they were carrying nothing except weapons.

"They have left the carrying of the game for the squaws," he observed.

"No," cried Flora, "I can tell by their faces that the hunt has failed. They have found no caribou and are in a bad mood. You had better leave me here."

"Not if we have to fight the whole tribe," declared Dunvegan.

But his eyes, only, saw the Crees coming up to the sun-scalded camp. His mental vision focused on the image of Desirée Lazard. He had told Basil Dreaulond that he was anxious to complete his mission and return to Oxford House. And Basil had smiled, knowing well why! Now was he

doubly anxious. Flora's news had a perturbing effect. He hungered for a sight of Desirée singing gayly within the stockades. He yearned for the chance of conflict to sweep the Nor'wester's shadow from her path.

CHAPTER III

AN ULTIMATUM

THE Cree bucks came slowly up the point, forming a sort of respectful retinue to Running Wolf, his son, Three Feathers, and others of the head men whose dignity of tribal status allowed them to stalk in front.

Slovenly squaws and dirty, round-eyed children now appeared from the dark interiors of wigwams which before had shown no sign of life. These began to cluck their derision and to indulge in shrieking laughs of ridicule to the visible discomfiture of the hunters. Half-tamed curs as fierce looking as their wolf ancestors grew bold enough with the advent of the masters to issue from various hiding-places and organize a snapping charge upon Dunvegan. They rushed in a body, howling wickedly and baring

vicious, chisel-like fangs, but the chief trader plucked a stick from a tepee fire and belabored their hard heads till they retreated faster than they had charged.

Wild uproar spread through the camp. The dogs' battle snarls were changed to lugubrious wailings of defeat. Old women rated the mongrels, ordering them back to their places. The braves shouted injunctions of silence upon the squaws, while the children added to the climax by scuttling and shrieking out of sheer contagion.

Running Wolf obtained quiet at last by a violence of gesture that threatened to tear his arms from their sockets. With the quiet came his reprimand to his people, delivered in deep-throated Cree, and their instant assumption of meekness vouched for the acid quality of his phrases. Then he approached Dunvegan, with Three Feathers at his heels.

"*Bo' jou',* Running Wolf; *bo' jou',* Three Feathers," greeted the chief trader.

"*Bo' jou',* Strong Father," returned the Cree chieftain with grave politeness.

Three Feathers did not speak, but contented himself with nodding sullenly. He was not a favorite with Dunvegan. Several times the two had clashed in the process of trade, for Running Wolf's son was a spoiled child of the wilderness grown up to ignorant and stubborn maturity. He represented the ambitious type of Indian, the dissentient, the inciter, the yeast of superstitious unrest fated to be the curse of his race.

"Your hunting has been unrewarded," sympathized the chief trader, speaking to Running Wolf. He used the Cree dialect which he had acquired in his years of dealing with the natives.

"*Ae,*" replied Running Wolf. "We did not find the caribou. Nor did we see the trail of any other game."

"How was that?" asked Dunvegan. "Your braves are wise in the ways of the caribou, the moose, and all of the wild creatures. How is it their cunning brought them nothing?"

"I do not know," the chief responded simply. "but the spirits were not kind to

us. Perhaps the north wind told the caribou of our coming."

"It was not so," spoke Three Feathers maliciously. "It was instead the bad magic of the white traders. The spirits also were kind, for they gave us no game and turned us from our hunting that our squaws might not be stolen." He talked brazenly, having shrewdly guessed in his feverish brain that Dunvegan's errand concerned the woman his father wished to take as a squaw.

"Who steals our women?" cried Running Wolf, turning on his son with an expression of vague alarm.

"Ask the Strong Father there," Three Feathers directed, forcing the issue upon Dunvegan.

"Yes, ask the Strong Father," interposed Flora Macleod, speaking also in Cree. "Inquire whence he has journeyed. Question him as to why he has come." She was quick to seize any advantage which might arise for her from the injuring of Running Wolf's pride.

The chief looked searchingly at the trader

and at the trader's brigade, as if to read their intent.

"Strong Father," he declared, "the lodges of my people are open to you. My heart is right toward you in spite of the high words of my son and the White Squaw. They would have me think you walk against my wigwams to do me harm. Tell them whence you have voyaged. Perhaps even now you are come from the Stern Father by the Holy Lake!"

"That is so," admitted Dunvegan. "I come from Oxford House and from the Factor, him you call the Stern Father. He has sent me here to do his bidding."

"*Ae,*" snarled Three Feathers, interrupting impetuously. "He comes to take back the White Squaw. I see it in his eyes. He is a traitor and a foe!"

Dunvegan seized the brave's arm with a vicious pinch.

"You young hothead," he cried angrily, "you go too far. Keep behind with the women till you get some wisdom!"

His back-twist of the arm sent Three

Feathers hurtling in among a group of squaws about a tepee door, where he sprawled ingloriously with his heels in the air.

The downfall of the haughty son set the Indian women roaring afresh with laughter, but the braves muttered ominously. Among them Three Feathers was a power growing nearer the usurping point which would shatter the father's sane control of the tribe.

Running Wolf himself gazed upon the incident quite unaffected. He watched his son rise from his ludicrous position, the hawk-like face marred by hideous wrath and the beady eyes glittering with revengeful lights. He observed Three Feathers slink out of sight in the crowd of young bucks. And he nodded sagely.

"So," he commented, "they learn wisdom and come to be head men. But why have you come, Strong Father, with so many canoes? Do you build a new post? Or do you fight the French Hearts?" The French Hearts was his name for the Nor'westers.

"Neither," answered Dunvegan. "The

Factor sent me many moons ago to find his daughter and to bring her back to the Fort."

"Ah-hah!" exclaimed Running Wolf. "Then it is even as Three Feathers, the hasty one, said! His guesses are greater than my wisdom."

"Listen," urged the chief trader, putting a hand on the Cree's arm. "The Factor did not know where the girl was. All he knew was that she harkened to the wooing of Black Ferguson, our enemy. She made trysts with him in spite of our vigilance, and finally escaped to his forts and married him. Married him and bore a son to him in the face of Macleod's black wrath! You know the Stern Father, Running Wolf. You know how such a thing would gripė. How he would writhe under the scorn of his foe and under the northland's mocking laughter! You know?"

"*Ae*," answered Running Wolf. "I know."

"Then you understand. 'Go out,' he said to me. 'I will not brook it. Go out.

I have never been bent by man or devil. Go out! Raze forts! Burn! Kill! But bring back her and her boy.' And that I will do, Running Wolf. I obey his orders. The White Squaw, as you call her, returns with me."

A shade of anger crossed the Cree's copper-colored face. He drew back a step, his shoulders raised in haughty pride.

"Thus at a late day, Strong Father," he said, "you have turned enemy to me and to my people!"

"Not so," Dunvegan contradicted. "I am still your friend, as you have had cause to know. But I have my orders. I must do the Stern Father's bidding. Running Wolf, you say to your young men: 'Go forth and do such a thing.' It is done as you command. You have power and wisdom to rule, and the braves, recognizing your authority and holding the tribe's interests at heart, will do your mission if they die in the doing. Is it not so with your people, my friend?"

"*Ae,*" replied the chief with warmth. "It is so, for I have many trusted ones."

"Then"—Dunvegan was quick to follow up his advantage—"it is even so with me. I do my duty to my Company and to my Factor, whom you rightly call the Stern Father. Do you understand, Running Wolf?"

"I understand," responded the Cree. "I see that you come in no bitterness, and the White Squaw shall go as you say."

Flora Macleod was quick to voice her disapproval of his words.

"Have you no spirit?" she cried wrathfully. "Do you give in when there is a tribe at your back? Running Wolf, you haven't the courage of a rabbit. Your son were fitter to rule these wigwams than such an old fool of a father! A pretty mind to guide a people!"

"I give in to save my children trouble and strife," returned Running Wolf gravely. "I know Strong Father well. He would fight for as little as a blanket stolen from his Company, although his heart is friendly. You shall go, White Squaw, but I go also. I go to take counsel

with the Stern Father, to ask that you abide in my lodge."

The tone of his last statement told Dunvegan that on this point he was adamant. Flora Macleod flounced back to her child, the wrath of her soul choking at her lips.

"Make ready," urged the chief trader. "We start at once."

He waited by the chief's tepee while the two set about what slight preparations were needed for departure and watched the clean-limbed bucks idling down to the Katchewan's bank. Three Feathers, brooding in his spiteful anger, loitered with them, on edge to create a disturbance. Dunvegan saw that the Indians were massing at the landing-point, and he shouted a command to his men to keep them away.

Pete Connear, an American and an ex-sailor who had drifted north by the Red River route and entered the Company's service, did as directed, but the braves gave ground sullenly. Three Feathers himself became vociferous.

"Dogs and sons of dogs," he anathema-

tized them, "you have hearts of water to steal about, capturing women."

"Shut up," advised Connear dryly.

"Salt Rat," Three Feathers sent back, stamping in impotent rage, "there is no place for you here in the forest. Get away to your Big Waters."

He emphasized his language with a swift-thrown palmful of slimy sand, which struck the ex-sailor squarely in the eyes. Connear roared like a bull and leaped ashore from his birch-bark craft.

"You bloomin' copper-hide," he bellowed in blind wrath, "I'll man-handle you for that."

Three Feathers was swift, but in anger Pete Connear was swifter. Almost before the young chief realized it the sailor was upon him. The Cree's wrists were pinned behind his back in the grip of Pete's left hand; he was whirled over the sailor's knee and given as sound a spanking as ever a recalcitrant child received.

Connear's palm was hard with years of searing brine; and Three Feathers was

blessed with no stoicism. He howled pitifully, while the Hudson's Bay men shouted in uproarious mirth.

But the young bucks of the crowd failed to see the humor of the situation. They gathered together with much muttering and gesturing. Dunvegan, shaking with laughter at the plight of Three Feathers, caught the signs of impending trouble and came running forward as Connear completed his enemy's chastisement.

"There!" exclaimed the bespattered Pete. "I've slippered your hide, and now I'll roll you in the scuppers just for sailor's luck!" He shot Three Feathers from his knee and sent him rolling down the bank into the river, from which the young man pulled himself out as bedraggled as a fur-soaked beaver.

The Cree bucks charged on the instant at the lone sailorman, but Dunvegan's arm waved as he ran, and like magic his men were out of their canoes and lined up on the river margin with guns at full cock. Connear danced a sailor's hornpipe in the

center and hooted in delightful anticipation of a fight.

The crisis seemed inevitable. A trade-gun barked in the rear. The braves, with murder in their untamed hearts, shook out their weapons ready to throw their weight against Dunvegan's line, but a deep-throated Cree voice held them on the verge of their madness.

"Stop!" called the vibrant voice of Running Wolf, "or I blast you with the evil spirit."

As one man the crowd turned and looked at the speaker.

The old chief stood behind them with Flora and her child. He was arrayed in the robes of a medicine-maker, for Running Wolf was a man of magic as well as a leader among his people. He carried the full equipment of a head medicine-man of his tribe.

The effect of his appearance on the malcontents was instantaneous. Arms which had raised weapons dropped to the owner's sides. A great awe grew in the eyes of the

braves. Running Wolf raised his medicine-wand, sweeping it in a half circle.

"Go back to your lodges!" he ordered.

The Crees obeyed. There arose no murmur, no protest.

Dunvegan knew Running Wolf could not have done this thing by his powers of chieftainship. He marveled how in their wild bosoms the fear of the unknown overshadowed their defiance of the power of personality. Assuredly it was strong medicine.

CHAPTER IV

OMENS OF THE LAW

THE chief took the indicated place in Dunvegan's canoe with Flora and her boy. These sat amidships. Wahbiscaw was in his place as bowsman. Bruce himself occupied the stern. At a sign from him the whole brigade floated off, the prows pointing up the swift-flowing Katchawan. Thus for an hour the paddles dipped in rhythm. They threaded the river's island channels and won through its rushing chutes. Where the rapids proved too swift for paddles they poled the craft up with long spruce poles. Few words were spoken. It was the custom to travel in silence. One reason for this was that Nor'west traders might be lurking anywhere. Another was that game might be encountered around any of the many river bends.

But the brigade left the Katchawan without a sight of game and entered the mouth of Lake Lemeau. Maskwa, the Ojibway fort runner, stood erect, sentinel-like, in the canoe behind Dunvegan, his keen eyes searching the lake waters for sign of friend or foe. Quite suddenly he sat down.

"Canoe, Strong Father," he grunted gutturally.

"Where?" the chief trader asked.

"Below Bear Island."

Quietly Dunvegan shifted his bow till the canoe bore a course which would bring them directly in the path of the strange craft. He had no idea whose it might be. It might belong to some trapper or to some Indian of their own Company. It might belong to the Nor'westers. It might carry free traders. Whatever it was, it was his duty to find out.

Warm yellow the bark shone as the distance lessened. Sapphire glints flashed out as the paddles flickered after each plunge. Soon the men of the brigade could see that the craft contained four figures, but it was

Maskwa's long-range vision which discerned their nationalities.

"Ojibways, two; white men, two," he announced. "Good paddlers."

And so it proved when they drew near. Dunvegan saw, seated behind the native bowsman, a keen-visaged, lean, athletic man of forty. He had a smooth face, sandy hair, eyes of a cold, hard blue, a beak nose, and great, sinewed arms. About him was the stamp of the frontier. Instinctively at first glimpse the chief trader catalogued him as one who had seen much frontier fighting, who had handled guns and bad men running amuck with guns.

Fit mate for him looked the one sitting toward the stern. He was abnormally broad of shoulder, stocky, powerful, black-bearded, black-eyed. The sun had smoked him till he was as swarthy as the Ojibway steersman. Of the two white men he looked the more dangerous, for there was no humor in his steady eyes. His companion's gaze, cold and hard as it was, held something of a quizzical gleam. Perhaps it was the hol-

lows under those eyes that gave him that appearance.

As Dunvegan's craft met the other almost bow to bow and slipped ahead, the gunwales grated gently. Bruce closed a hand on the gunwales of the other and the two canoes drifted as one.

The sandy-haired man's semi-humorous eyes flashed a quick look aboard, and then he smiled. "You sure couldn't do that, stranger, if my pardner and me hadn't decided to speak to you," he observed.

"Couldn't I?" challenged Dunvegan. He scrutinized men and outfit. "Free traders, I suppose?"

"Guess again."

"Nor'westers, eh?"

"You got another guess coming yet."

"Oh, quit it, Granger," the black-bearded man broke in, stirring impatiently among the dunnage bags. "You're wasting time. Show him the star."

The sandy-haired one twisted his suspender band. Dunvegan saw the badge of a United States Marshal.

"It's genuine, stranger. And we're sure not here for our health. Are we, Garfield?"

"No," growled the black-bearded marshal. "A show-down's the thing that we're after."

"You fooled me," laughed Dunvegan. "But you had better exhibit your papers. My Factor is death on free traders; and I have to report to him, you know."

"Who's your Factor?" the smooth-faced marshal asked as he dived into the pocket of his buckskin coat that was stuffed under the forward thwart.

"Macleod, of Oxford House."

"Macleod, eh? Macleod!" rumbled Granger while he searched. "Don't know him. But we sure will when we get to his post. We've been up around the Bay forts. When we've done Norway House and the posts out that way we'll be across to Oxford. See you again, then. Hello, here's the papers!"

He handed Dunvegan two frayed documents. As he scanned them the chief trader saw they were genuine enough. The first

was an order of the chief district factor of the Hudson's Bay Company declaring all forts open to the bearers. The second was a similar mandate of the Northwest Fur Company for use in their posts and issued from the headquarters in Montreal.

" These are through passes," smiled Dunvegan, handing them back. " I know the chief district factor's signature. And it seems you are equipped for a hunt in Nor'-west country as well. Is there anything I can do for you? "

" You've done all you can do—let us see you and your men," grinned Granger. " That's all we wanted. Eh, Garfield? "

" That's all," Garfield agreed, condescending to laugh so that his gleaming white teeth split his black beard. " Hit her up there, you bucks," he commanded the Ojibways.

The Indians seized their paddles. Dunvegan let go the gunwales. " Good luck," he nodded.

" Hold on," yelled Granger suddenly. " Maybe I ought to say more. A hint from

you would sure save us some miles. Here, look at this!"

He dived again into the buckskin coat and handed a photograph across the water gap.

"Do you know him?" he demanded, keenly reading the chief trader's face. "Mind, I don't say he's what we're after. I don't say he's done anything. Do you know him? He's in the service of one of these fur companies."

The picture Dunvegan looked at was that of a bare-faced man in robust health, a strong man who was in the super-strength of his prime. The eyes were vivid, clear as crystal, sharp as steel. The chief trader felt that the glance of the living original would cut like a knife. These eyes puzzled him with a sense of vague familiarity, but the face he scanned was the face of no one in his memory-gallery.

He shook his head, and oddly enough he felt a reluctance, a disappointment in denial. "I don't know him," he decided, and handed the photograph back.

Like a hawk Granger had watched his

face. He read truth in it. "Oh, well!" he exclaimed whimsically. "The way of the transgressor and the marshal is sure hard." Once more his quizzical expression flashed forth as he twirled his paddle aloft in good-by.

"Shake, stranger," he threw back in final farewell, while the long craft leaped under the Ojibways' strokes. "Shake! Till I see you at Oxford House!"

Flora Macleod watched the solitary canoe drop away out of sight. Then, when it was gone, she leaned forward to the chief trader's shoulder.

"Was that last answer of yours lie or loyalty?" she asked with strange timidity.

Dunvegan turned a surprised face. "It was ignorance," he amended. He saw Flora's cheeks pale, her eyes full of a haunting fear.

"What's wrong?" he demanded in astonishment.

"That picture—I—I saw it, too."

"Well?"

"It was my father's!"

OMENS OF THE LAW

Dawn set a wall of flame on Oxford Lake. Out of this solar furnace drifted a fleet of canoes black as charred logs against the cardinal blaze. Clement Nemaire, sentinel at the stockade gates of Oxford House, caught sight of the craft in the immense distance advancing with a motion which, though scarcely discernible, nevertheless brought them gradually into large perspective. His black eyes, keen as lenses, steadily watched the approaching flotilla while it breasted Caribou Point and crossed the outer rim of the Bay. When the fleet drew opposite Mooswa Hill, the mighty rampart upon whose crest a brushwood beacon stood always piled ready for firing by the Hudson's Bay fort runners as a warning message of impending Nor'west attacks, Clement made out the sharp, black line of a flagstaff in the bow of the foremost canoe. From the staff's tip a long standard bellied like a sail in the cross wind, its vivid hue blending with the fiery background, and Nemaire knew the familiar blood-red banner of his Company.

" De brigade! " he shouted for all the post to hear. *"Holá!* De beeg brigade! "

Every soul of Oxford House sprang forth at his cry. In a heterogeneous crowd the people spread to the landing at the lake-shore. White traders, fair-skinned women, full-blooded Indians, halfbreeds, squaws, papooses, huskies,* all mingled in polyglot confusion. Curs barked; children squealed; native tongues chattered in many languages. Eager expectancy, intense interest, was the sensation of each human being or animal that waited on the beach. Their wild hearts, keyed to a love of the vast places, to a worship of all the attributes of wilderness life, could never welcome a brigade unmoved. That distinct institution of the Hudson's Bay Company was a thing which they idolized and revered. The crowd in a fever of joyous excitement pressed to the very water's edge and shifted the length of the landing. Each minute of waiting they filled with clamor and gesticulation, the hum of voices growing to a roar as Dunvegan's brigade approached within hailing distance.

* Eskimo sledge dogs.

But behind them a heavy step sounded on the veranda of the Factor's house, and looking, they saw the square-set bulk of Malcolm Macleod. A hush blanketed the confusion. Not a foot or tongue stirred by the lake-edge. So deep was the stillness that the slight wash of the plunging canoes could be heard distinctly. The Factor did not speak, but his bushy eyebrows lowered and the piercing gaze of his steely, black eyes was concentrated on the scene. His iron hands, symbols of the man, gripped the railing tightly. Like the crowd, he waited; but while their impelling motive was curiosity, Macleod's was judgment.

The fleet of canoes lined for the landing, the figures of the occupants growing clear. The throng could now see that the chief trader and Wahbiscaw, his bowsman, had two passengers in the foremost craft. When they became recognizable as Flora Macleod and Running Wolf, whispers of wonder and speculation began to circulate. Discussion ran like the murmur of low waters from Father Brochet, the black-cassocked, unob-

trusive priest on the outer rim of the gathering, to rude Gaspard Follet, the owl-faced, dwarf-shaped, half-witted fool who sat on the end of the landing with bare feet in the water, that he might be closest to the incomers.

Conversing in a little group beside Father Brochet stood Desirée Lazard, the fairest of Oxford House; Pierre, her uncle, and Basil Dreaulond. As the brigade touched the bank, the rushing people blotted it out. The paddlers leaped ashore, stretched cramped limbs, and were swallowed up in the throng. Presently the mighty figure of Bruce Dunvegan emerged, leading Running Wolf and Flora MacLeod from the landing toward the Factor's house.

Contrary to his usual custom, Malcolm Macleod did not turn into his council room to receive the report and do his questioning. The fact that the runaway daughter appeared before him accounted for his coming down a few steps to await the trio.

"You've succeeded," he growled unceremoniously, bending his angry glance, not

upon the chief trader, but upon Flora, who returned a stare of equal intensity.

"Not altogether," complained Dunvegan. "Things are not as clear as I could wish. I found the girl in Running Wolf's lodge. I understand Black Ferguson deserted her near the Cree camp."

Macleod's habitually active brain seemed slow in comprehending the statement. The tight lines of his mouth relaxed, and his jaws jarred apart in an attitude of sheer amazement.

"Stern Father," Running Wolf hastened to add, "it is my wish and the White Squaw's wish that she remain in my lodge. As for the sun and the stars and the south wind is my worship for her. I have come for your consent." He bowed in his brief oratorical delivery and smoothed his medicine-maker's dress.

"Consent!—Squaw!" boomed Macleod, blank astonishment giving way under the swift rush of his tremendous rage. "You d—d Cree demigod—that's my consent!" And his strong hands hurled Running Wolf

headlong from the veranda steps almost to the rim of the gaping crowd.

The old warrior picked himself up in a frenzy of spirit and, forgetting all traditions and restraints, rushed insanely at the Factor. But Dunvegan blocked his path and grasped the uplifted hand.

"Don't do that, Running Wolf," he warned. "You can only work your own ruin. A blow would mean your death!"

Chest heaving, eyes blazing, the Cree chieftain strained a moment after his insulter. Dunvegan's strength forced him back and instilled some substance of sanity. When he found his voice, his speech trembled with hate.

"You are Stern Father now," he hissed in Cree, "but I can change it to Soft Father——"

Macleod took a step forward as if on sudden impulse to crush once for all a defiance flung in his teeth, but he caught the look of entreaty for lenience in the chief trader's eyes. He halted. Yet Running Wolf was not to be appeased. He glared vindictively

into the very face of the lord of Oxford House.

"Soft Father you shall be," he declared. "I go to the French Hearts. We will meet again before many moons. Then my hands shall hurl. My words shall curse. You shall be as the broken pot of clay, as the water of melting ice, as the pool of blood where the big moose falls."

The chief's momentarily-lost stoicism was regained. His dignity, which the red man seldom loses, had returned.

Dunvegan, his hands still upon the Cree's arms, felt the change in him, felt him straighten with pride. He released his grip.

Running Wolf stepped quietly back. "I go," he announced without emotion. "I go, but when the French Hearts are climbing stockades and burning posts about your ears, I will be with them. Then when I have rolled you stiff in your blanket will I take the White Squaw to my wigwam!"

He whirled at the last word and stalked to the beach. Flora Macleod looked upon him with eyes that lightened.

"You old fire-eater," she laughed hysterically, "I almost love you for those words." Her glance shifted to Dunvegan who had grasped her arm that she might not follow the Cree chieftain if she were so inclined. "Don't you?" she asked.

"He is to be admired," the chief trader admitted.

But Malcolm Macleod swore a fearful oath in which there was no semblance of admiration as they watched Running Wolf glide out upon Oxford Lake in a canoe borrowed from some Crees formerly of his tribe on the Katchawan.

"Let the cursed traitor go over to the side of the Nor'westers!" he cried. "Let him help Black Ferguson and his sneaking dogs! I have no fear of them. I'm not afraid of man or devil. And why should I trouble myself about a picket of ragged Frenchmen! Bah! I can handle them as I handled the Cree. I'm lord of this country. Every man knows it. Every man *must* know it!"

As everyone at this and all the other northern posts understood, Malcolm Macleod

was ruled by twin passions: pride and hate. He paid homage to no other emotion, idol, or deity. Fear could not touch his heart. Love was long ago crushed out. The tentacles of greed never held him. He had no dread of the evil machinations of hell. Neither did he recognize such a thing as divine providence. His Bible that in his half-forgotten past had been fingered nightly lay upon an unused upper shelf in his council room, sepulchred in twenty years of dust.

Fallen into silent brooding, the Factor stared at the disappearing speck upon the vast water, the speck which was Running Wolf and his craft. Dunvegan had to arouse him.

" The woman and the child," he prompted. " What is to be done with them? "

Macleod wheeled. " See that she gets no canoe to leave the post," was his curt order. " She goes out with Abbé DuCerne to the nunnery at Montreal before the frost closes in."

As some fierce interpreter of high-latitude laws he pronounced the judgment, and

Flora Macleod's spirit crumpled under its weight. It came suddenly—this most appalling thing that could happen a lover of liberty. For once in her life she had no defiant retort for the man she accepted as her father. At the vision of veil, cowl, and white walls, things some people loved, her eyes dilated in horror. The woman's heart throbbed sickeningly. Her tongue refused its mission of protest. Her knees gave way, letting her slip to the ground. There she lay, sobbing, the boy clasped close in her arms.

"Don't lie there," the Factor commanded roughly. "Get that child ready for the morning mass. I'll see that it is christened and given my own name. There'll be no Fergusons among my kin."

Full of sympathy, Dunvegan raised Flora Macleod to her feet and urged her to go inside, but she stubbornly refused to enter the house.

"Let her stay out then," cried her father, with a fresh burst of anger. "Or let her find a better house."

"There is Basil's," ventured the chief trader.

"Aye, there is Basil's, if it suits her." Macleod shrugged his mighty shoulders in bitter unconcern.

So Bruce told her to go to Dreaulond's cabin, where he knew she would be well cared for by the courier's gentle wife. Then he turned again to the moody Factor.

"I am afraid we have lost Running Wolf's trade," he observed.

"He will come back. He fears me, as they all do. And if he goes to the Nor'-westers, remember, we shall soon crush them. When they are swept out of the country, where else can the old fool trade?"

"But he may fight with them," Bruce persisted.

"Perhaps. However, they will need more than Running Wolf's aid to rout the Ancient and Honorable, the Hudson's Bay Company."

CHAPTER V

DESIRÉE

THE mass bell's solemn chime pealed forth from the squat tower of the Mission House, echoed against a thousand different rock peaks of the shoreline and rolled resonantly over Oxford's bosom till distance killed the sound and the tone was lost in the splash of whitecaps jumping like silvery salmon beyond the Bay.

Since Carman, the Church of England missionary, had perished in the winter's last blizzard on Lone Wolf Lake and the Company had failed as yet to get a minister in his place, the spiritual welfare of Oxford House was entirely in the hands of Father Brochet. Protestant and Catholic, disciple and pagan, zealot and scorner alike attended the kindly priest's services and sought his generous aid in many private matters.

With the bell's summons they came

singly, in twos or threes, and in groups of varying size to take part in, or view the morning mass as well as to see the christening of Flora Macleod's child.

Bruce Dunvegan left his business in the trading room of the Hudson's Bay Store and stepped out into the dewy sunshine. The auroral flame which had licked the waters of Oxford Lake was gone. He saw the horizon as a sheet of molten gold floating the coppery disc of the sun. From wet rocks the writhing mists twisted and uncoiled, while the breeze which crooned over the outer reach of the lake and raised the crested swells beat in with little darts and lanceolate charges, puffing the fog-smoke like the muzzle-jets of rifles.

As the chief trader contemplated the magnificent splendor of the watery vista before him, he thrilled with the indefinable magic of the outland. He inhaled a huge breath and threw his arms wide, the action nearly upsetting the balance of Edwin Glyndon, the new clerk, who had emerged at his side.

"Ha! Your pardon!" exclaimed Dunvegan, laughing. "These northern sunrises get into my blood like wine. You'll feel it before you are very long here. Going over to the Mission?"

"I wouldn't mind," returned Glyndon. "It's all so new to me, and I wasn't at Norway long enough to see much. Do you attend?"

"We all drop in," the chief trader informed him. "Brochet's faith has many adherents, but of course you don't have to take part unless your inclinations run that way. You are a Church of England man, I suppose!"

"Oh, yes—quite an orthodox one," laughed Glyndon bitterly. "Didn't you know I drank myself and parents into disgrace at home? That's why they sent me out here—away from the evil ruts, you understand! And I fancy it might not be so hard to be a good Churchman in this wilderness. At any rate the chances are increased."

"This is the best opportunity that you will ever find," Dunvegan declared. "If

you want to go straight and live clean, the way is easy. It seems to me these lake breezes, these pine woods, these outdoor days are a long way removed from temptation."

He swung his hands illustratively from the sheen of Oxford's surface to the dark green of the Black Forest, which loomed in somber mystery on Caribou Point, and looked into the clerk's soft eyes. But Edwin Glyndon was staring over the chief trader's shoulder at someone coming up the path to the store.

"Good Lord!" was his amazed exclamation. "Who in all the angels' category is that?"

Dunvegan turned to see Lazard's niece hurrying toward the building.

"That? Oh, Desirée Lazard!" he answered, striving ineffectually to keep his stirring blood from crimsoning his tan. "She's a ward of old Pierre since her father died. Pierre is her uncle."

"My word!" Glyndon gasped, and could say no more; although his chin went nerv-

ously up and down while Desirée Lazard approached.

She walked without perceptible effort in that easy rhythm of movement peculiar to wilderness-born women. Her hair, dun-gold as the morning sky behind, was pinned in a loose knot and parted in the center, letting the shimmer and wave of the tresses play upon either side like shallow-water ripples over sun-browned gravel. Forehead, cheeks, nose and mouth held serene beauty in their perfect chiselling, while her eyes shone like twin lakes of the north, sapphire-blue beneath the morning sun.

So sincere were the men in the unconscious homage they paid to her fairness that they did not move aside to let her enter the door. She stopped and gazed inquiringly at the stranger. And the pair gazed at her. They marvelled at the luxurious development of throat, bosom, and arms, clearly revealed by a tight-fitting chamois waist with open neck and rolled-up sleeves, and at the trim, full contour of her healthy body from the tops of her shoulders to the hem

of her doeskin skirt and on down the well-filled leggins to moccasined feet which would hardly have covered a man's palm.

"Good morning, Bruce," she said demurely. "Good morning, monsieur——"

"Glyndon—Edwin Glyndon," supplemented the clerk, eagerly. He was delighted to find that ceremony was an unknown thing in the posts and that each greeted a neighbor whether formally acquainted or not.

"I have told Glyndon you are Pierre's niece," Dunvegan interposed. "He has been drafted from Norway House as our clerk and will henceforth be one of us."

"Ah! Monsieur will find the society of Oxford House limited after living in London," laughed Desirée.

"More limited, but assuredly not less desirable," Glyndon returned gallantly; and the dwelling of his soft eyes on the girl brought the rose to her cheeks.

"Come," she cried peremptorily to hide her confusion, "let me go in and get my things or I shall be late for mass."

Dunvegan thought to wait upon her, but the English clerk sprang in first.

" It is for me to serve," he declared. " I must learn my business."

And the chief trader experienced a pang of intense jealousy as he watched the laughter and badinage of the two across the counter while Desirée made her purchases. He glowered in dark envy and strode out on to the steps. When the girl danced gaily over the threshold, he did not speak.

Glyndon rejoined him, his eyes devouring the lithe, swinging form of Desirée Lazard as she rushed home humming a little French song under her breath.

" Jove! " he exclaimed. " Did you ever see such a figure? Look at the inswell of the torso to the waist and the outswell over the hips——"

But Dunvegan's hand falling like a great weight on his shoulder cut short the speech. Glyndon felt that grip clear through his body; felt his collar bone bend beneath the chief trader's thumb, and he winced.

" Glyndon, never admire a woman in

that way," Bruce warned. "Never, I say! Do you understand me?"

The English clerk slunk back under the powerful menace in Dunvegan's glance.

"Oh!" he ejaculated with swift intuition. "I didn't know that you——"

"That'll do," the chief trader cut in. "You don't know anything yet. Try not to bother your head! Go on over to the Mission House!" He started Edwin Glyndon down the path.

Malcolm Macleod for the first time in twenty years had entered the chapel, not for the service but for the christening. Dunvegan left the store in charge of his *mètis* clerk and followed.

Was he going for the service? Perhaps, for he was a good man, and his religious creed was not a narrow one. Was he going for the christening also? Undoubtedly, for he was to stand sponsor for the child.

But in the depths of his being something cried a third reason.

Across the flat ground which served as the trading house yard lay the chapel. Roughly

built after the fashion of northern missions, its very ruggedness suggested the strength of the faith for which it stood as symbol.

As Dunvegan approached the steps, people were already filing rapidly through the narrow doorway. A medley of types was there. Acorn-headed squaws pattered in. Morose Indians filed after. Women, children, and settlers drifted through the doorway. The Hudson's Bay men slouched over. Trappers and halfbreeds filled the single aisle. At the end of a rough bench in one front corner of the building sat the Factor, dour and unyielding. His head was bowed. Not a muscle of his body moved. Perched on the opposite end of that seat was Gaspard Follet, the Fool who had drifted in from nowhere to the post about a year before. It was the Fool's delight to go about hearing everything through dog-like ears, seeing everything through owlish eyes.

None could find out who or what he was, or whence he had come. Yet many at Oxford House contended that he was not so

simple as he appeared. They declared that he was as wise as themselves and only kept up the sham to get an easy living. In proof of their contention these suspicious ones set forth his glibness of tongue when he pleased, for on occasion he could talk as well as Brochet.

As Dunvegan seated himself not far from Pierre Lazard and his niece, the mass began in solemn intonation.

"*In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*," began Father Brochet, the mass book supported where the black cassock bulged over his portly waist.

The clear voice of the clerk answered with sonorous "amens", and the responses rose in chorus.

Dunvegan looked at the Factor. The latter seemed unconscious that an earnest service was progressing. Sunk in stony oblivion, he appeared absolutely motionless, his chest neither rising nor falling as he breathed.

The long, familiar service was finally concluded, and those who had taken no part

other than as mere listeners sat up with an expectant shuffle. Flora Macleod moved to the front with her child and stood before the altar. Father Brochet looked down upon her. There was no reproach in his mièn. Experience had taught him that in such a case as this women followed their own hearts even to fleeing from their parents.

A hush brooded over the chapel's interior, a sort of awkward silence, a dread of things running awry! The child's whimper broke it, and Flora swayed the boy in her arms to quiet him.

Brochet spoke when she finished, his clear voice carrying to the door and even outside where some latecomers unable to find seats were grouped on the slab of rough stone which served for a step.

"Who is the male parent, the father of the child?" he asked in the natural course of the ceremony.

Deep silence reigned. Flora Macleod's lips closed tightly, indicating that out of stubbornness she would not speak the name. People looked at the Factor, and he turned

from his immobility with the attitude of a sleeping bear suddenly prodded ino angry activity.

"Black Ferguson," he snarled. sidling over a foot or so upon the bench.

"The name this child is to bear with honor through life?" Father Brochet continued.

"Honor?" grunted Macleod. "I don't know about that. No doubt he will inherit the spirit of disobedience from his mother. Call him Charles Ian Macleod! There will be no Ferguson in it."

A murmur stirred the assemblage at the Factor's rude remark, but they dared not add protest to their surprises. Dunvegan of course, had expected it from the first.

"Who stands as sponsor for this infant?" asked the priest.

Macleod swung himself half round and nodded to Dunvegan. Bruce rose to his feet, seeing with surprise that Gaspard, the Fool, had also raised himself up by jumping upon the seat.

"Who stands sponsor?"

"I", squealed the idiot. "Also, he can

have my name, for if the truth came out, it is as good as anyone's and——"

He got no farther for old Pierre Lazard pulled the foolish dwarf off his perch before the angry Factor could strike him and pushed him unceremoniously to the door amid the suppressed chuckles of the assembly.

"Again, who stands sponsor?" inquired the unruffled Father Brochet.

"I do," spoke Dunvegan.

"Do you, Charles Ian Macleod, renounce the devil, his angels and all their evil works?"

"I do," Dunvegan, as sponsor, replied.

"Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost?"

"I believe!"

"It is well," observed Brochet. "We may now proceed with the service of baptism. Behold in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost I baptize you Charles Ian Macleod. And may the good Lord's mercy lead your feet in honorable paths."

"Amen! Amen! Amen!" rang the responses in many tongues throughout the chapel.

With the chanting of a hymn the people poured forth. Flora disappeared instantly with her child, waiting for no birth offering.

The Factor was equally swift in effacing himself from the unfamiliar Mission House. One of his desires had been fulfilled. There remained the other, and the consummation of that one promised to be a harder matter.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE BLOOD

DUNVEGAN hastened after Desirée Lazard and overtook her near her uncle's cabin. Pierre himself had gone in ahead.

" Wait a moment, Desirée," he begged. " I want you to promise me something. I'll have no peace till you do. Macleod has ordered me to build at once the new post on the site I selected——"

" Kamattawa? " she queried.

" Yes. It is to hold the Nor'westers in check."

Desirée smiled. " The company of my father! " she reproved gently.

" Would that there were no need to fight them! " Dunvegan breathed. " Would that I might stay here! But I cannot. And it is torture for me to go with fear and doubt

in my mind. I want your solemn promise that this man Ferguson shall have no speech with you."

"Why?" She was looking at him with her head turned sidewise like a saucy bird.

"Why?" Bruce echoed. "Surely you don't mean that. You know what he is. You saw to-day what he has done. They say he is hard set after you. And your heart should recoil from the very idea. Why? You don't mean it, Desirée. You are not that shallow!"

Her eyes suddenly softened. "Forgive me, Bruce. I was only tormenting you. I promise. I freely promise." She thrust both hands in his.

Dunvegan's blood leaped at the contact, but he controlled himself. "That's well, Desirée," he murmured. "That's so much gained. And what I gain I never lose. Perhaps when I come back I may gain still more!"

His gaze had a hunger in it. The whole strong manliness of his honest nature was pleading for what she had hitherto denied

him. Desirée felt the strength of his passion and lowered her glance.

There were people passing, but foot by foot in her maddening elusiveness Desirée had drawn from the trail till she was hidden behind the outer cabin door which swung half open. Dunvegan, his shoulders wedged in the opening, tried to read her face.

"In a few days I'll be gone to build Kamattawa," he went on. "Give me some hope before I go. Don't send me away without a shred of encouragement, Desirée."

Wide-eyed she gazed at him. She was flushed, her manner all uncertain. Her breath came quickly. Abruptly she flung out her arms in a swift gesture of pity.

"Bruce," she cried, "it might be some time—if—if things were different."

"How?"

"If you didn't hold so strongly to the Hudson's Bay Company."

Dunvegan stepped back, his lips closed grimly.

"Would you—ever break your allegiance?" Desirée faltered.

"Never while my blood runs!"

"Oh, your proud spirit!" she lamented. "And mine as proud! It's no use, Bruce. It's no use."

She sprang up on the steps, but Dunvegan caught her by the arms.

"Don't," she protested. "There are people passing."

"They can't see," he replied feverishly. "You musn't go like this without telling me more. Why will you keep this barrier between us?"

"I have vowed I will never wed a man except he be of my own company."

"But why? What is the loyalty of old service to a woman?"

"As much as to a man. Remember every man of the companies was bred of woman. It is a matter of blood. And loyalty to the Northwest Company is in my blood."

Because the feminine soul of her was beyond his understanding, the chief trader was smitten with bitterness and anger. "And you will forever swear by these Nor'westers?" he demanded. "You will

swear by a lot of frontier ruffians herded under the leadership of such a scoundrel as Black Ferguson? Tell me that!"

"I must," Desirée answered.

Dunvegan turned on his heel without another word.

But Desirée was flying after him as he reached the trail. Her hand was on his shoulder.

"Bruce," she panted.

He stopped. His face was cold, impassive.

"Well?"

"I must because—my—my father died with them. His spirit is in me." Both her hands were on his shoulders now. She was very much in earnest, and it hurt her that he should in any way misconstrue her motives. "There are times," she continued, "when I feel I hate the Hudson's Bay Company and all its servants. But at those times I always have to amend my hatred. Not *all* its servants! Don't you understand?"

She let him fathom her eyes, and he understood. There he caught a gleam of some-

thing he had never surprised before. The joy of the discovery ran through him like exultant fire.

He prisoned both the wrists at his shoulders. "Desirée, you care! You care a little!"

"Yes," she breathed, and still unwillingly, "I care—a little!"

With the partial confession she wrenched free and rushed blindly indoors.

CHAPTER VII

LIEGES OF THE WILD

LIEGES of the most gigantic trust the world would ever see, the Hudson's Bay men filled Dunvegan's trading room when the long northern twilight fell upon the post. From above the chief trader's desk the Company's coat-of-arms, roughly carved on an oaken shield, looked down upon its hardy followers. The bold insignia seemed symbolic of the supremacy, the power, the privilege invested in that mighty institution.

Well might the Company pride itself on the sovereignty of a vast domain. Well might the Factors call themselves true lords of the North! The rights King Charles the Second had granted them extended over a territory of two and one-quarter million square miles, an empire one-third the size of

Europe. All other subjects of the Crown were expressly forbidden to visit or trade in this immense tract. Violation of the edict meant that trespassers ran the risk of sudden decease under the judgment of the Company's servants. For these were entrusted not only with the absolute proprietorship, supreme monarchy, and exclusive traffic of that undefined country known as Rupert's Land, which comprised all the regions discovered or to be discovered within the gates of Hudson's Strait, but also with the power of life and death over every aborigine or Christian who adventured there.

The only exemption along this line had been made a century after the erection of the corporation in 1670, consisting primarily of gallant Prince Rupert and his dare-devil associates, when provision of letters patent was made for those of the kingdom of New France, who had pushed northward to the shores of Hudson's Bay, whereby any actual possessions of any Christian prince or state were protected and withheld from the Company's operation. These claims were con-

firmed in 1697 by the Treaty of Ryswick, only to be abandoned by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. But still voyageurs of the adventurous heart wet their paddle blades in the Saskatchewan's sinuous waters, winding on the far quest of peltries toward the barrier of the Rockies. Conquest and cession interrupted such overland enterprises, but shrewd English business heads began later systematically to direct these undertakings till the pursuit finally led to the formation in 1783 of the Northwest Fur Company of Montreal.

Secure in its possession, strong in its kingship until now, the Hudson's Bay institution suddenly saw a dangerous rival invade its hitherto unmolested precincts, and the whole energy of the vast corporation was drawn upon to combat the ever encroaching Nor'westers. It was not to be supposed that the first lords of the North who had thrown their posts far across the basin of the Coppermine would give ground before the younger organization. Nor was it credible that the adventurers, who had ascended the

Mackenzie to the grim Arctic Ocean and pushed down to the Pacific by scaling the Rocky Mountains would stand aloof from a literally open country which would glut them with gain. One company's desires were as compelling as the other's. In temerity and endurance they were equally matched. The only issue could be a violent and bloody competition till one giant broke the hold of the adversary.

In the very heart of the contention, in one of the richest trading districts, Malcolm Macleod found himself locking arms with the redoubtable enemy of his corporation. These were the days of sudden surprises and stern reprisals; of secret plottings and bloody skirmishes. A Hudson's Bay fort was beleaguered; a Nor'west fur train sacked. Or, again, it was a stroke in the dark when a picket was wiped out, or an entire brigade destroyed.

Ably seconded by Bruce Dunvegan, the Factor upheld the interests of Oxford House and the Hudson's Bay Company with an iron hand. The problem of the

Nor'west advance faced him. Black Ferguson, one of the rival organization's leaders, had established a footing in the Katchawan Valley and built a fortified post, Fort La Roche, which was now the stronghold of the Nor'westers in that country. From there by secret trysts in which only a wayward girl would have indulged, Black Ferguson had enticed Macleod's daughter from under his very nose—enticed and deserted!

Alone in his council room Malcolm Macleod's black wrath boiled under the powerful insult. He had never seen Black Ferguson, but he promised himself that he should soon feast his eyes upon the Nor'wester trussed up in thongs with the fear of swift death confronting him. Macleod was only biding his time till Dunvegan should rear up Fort Kamattawa, the new post with which he intended to shut out Nor'westers from the Katchawan Valley. With Kamattawa as a base he would wipe Fort La Roche off the district.

The same possibility was being discussed by Bruce Dunvegan and his men as they

smoked their evening pipes in the hazy light of the trading room.

"Give me the least opportunity to strike the Nor'westers in the Valley, and I'll strike hard enough to crush Black Ferguson's fort," the chief trader declared. "When Kamattawa is finished, the Factor expects to capture La Roche, but if we ever get a chance in the meantime, we'll take it, and take it quick. Eh, men?"

They nodded grimly. They loved deeds more than words, and Bruce knew they were as eager as himself.

Sandy Stewart, the Lowland Scot of the canny head, at length broke silence, quitting his pipe long enough to utter a brief sentence: "We'll no be shuttin' oor eyes as we build." His own gray eyes twinkled craftily through the steel haze of the Company's tobacco.

Pete Connear was sprawling in sailor's attitude, his back on a bench, his knees drawn up to his chin. He shifted his legs to speak.

"Why not send a spy among them?" he

suggested. " There are lots of strange men in our service who could play the part."

" Too dangerous," commented the chief trader seriously. " Any man who enters an enemy's fort these days is putting his neck in a noose. Moreover it's impossible on both sides. The Nor'westers trust no stranger. Neither do we."

" We trusted yon gossoon Follet," put in Terence Burke, who had a brogue which was hard to smother.

" Bah! he's a fool."

" He talks loike a lawyer whin he plases. I think he's a deep wan."

" It's his idiocy. Gaspard is harmless. You see they could no more put a spy into Oxford House than we could employ a traitor to mingle in their ranks at La Roche. We must watch for our opening, daylight or dark, and catch Black Ferguson dozing. I'd give a thousand castors to lay hands on him right now! "

Basil Dreaulond emitted a low chuckle and beat his moccasin with the bowl of his pipe.

"Nobody don' nevaire catch dat man," he observed. "Ferguson mooch too smart; he got de heart lak wan black fox. De fellow w'at goin' git de bes' of heem mus' spik wit' *le diable,* yes!"

"Faith," Burke laughed, "he'd be spakin' wid his-self 'cause it's the divil in per-rson is me frind Black Ferguson. Oi clapped eyes on him wanst at Montreal."

"What did he look like, Terence?" asked Pete Connear. Even as the Factor, none of the other men had seen the troublesome Nor'wester at close range. The nearest vision they had had of him was in the gunsmoke of a skirmish or in the semi-darkness of a midnight raid.

"Fair as a Dane wid the same blue eyes," the Irishman answered.

"Listen till that, would ye!" cried Stewart. "An' why maun they gae callin' him 'Black' Ferguson?"

"Hees soul," explained Dreaulond tersely. "Everyt'ing dis man do be black as *diable.* Tak' more dan wan t'ousand pries' confess heem out of hell!"

"Kind of brother to Captain Kidd, or a cousin of old Morgan's, eh!" remarked Pete Connear. "Pretty figure to have leading the other side. I'd think the Nor'west Company would put a decent man in charge."

"He's just the sort they want," Dunvegan declared. "They know they're beyond their rights and trespassing on ours. They want a man who will stop at nothing. In Black Ferguson they have him!"

Even as Dunvegan finished speaking a scuffle arose at the door.

"What's that?" the chief trader demanded.

"Sounds like a husky," observed Pete Connear.

They could hear snarling and groaning with now and then a whimper of fear as from a frightened animal.

"No, it's a human voice," declared Dunvegan. He strode across the room and kicked up the latch.

The door swung back swiftly and in bounded the weird shape of Gaspard Follet,

the little idiot. He dashed forward as if propelled from a catapult, but the chief trader's peremptory voice halted him.

"Stop," Dunvegan commanded. "What in Rupert's name is the matter with you?"

Gaspard stood speechless. His owlish eyes glared in a perfect frenzy of real or simulated terror, and he hopped from one foot to the other in the center of the floor, hunching his dwarfed shoulders with a horrid, convulsive movement.

For the most part amazed silence struck the men, but Maskwa, the Ojibway fort runner, regarded Follet with the superstition of his race and jabbered in guttural accents.

"The Little Fool has seen a god," he asserted in Ojibway. "He has spoken with Nenaubosho!"

"*Non,*" was Basil Dreaulond's more commonplace explanation. "De mad *giddés* bite heem. Dis Gaspard goin' crazy lak' dose yelpin' beas'."

But the chief trader bade them speculate in silence.

"Speak, Follet," he urged. "Take a long breath and you'll get it out. Something's tried your nerves!"

"Ah!" gasped the Fool between his chattering teeth. "I have been frightened. I have been frightened." He crossed himself a score of times and shut out an imaginary vision by holding claw-like fingers before his great, staring eyes.

"Speak out," ordered Dunvegan sternly. "Where have you been all day? I haven't seen you since Pierre Lazard put you out of the Mission House this morning."

"In the Black Forest," answered the dwarf. "I went in a canoe to be alone, for they put me out of the chapel. Who was it? Oh, yes, old Pierre. I will remember that. I went in a canoe and I saw a devil."

"What was it?" asked Bruce, smiling.

"I—I forget." Gaspard beat his forehead in a vain attempt at recollection.

The chief trader was well acquainted with the Fool's frequent pilgrimages here and there, his harmless adventures, his constant lapses of memory. Where others sometimes

doubted, he believed Follet's imbecility was genuine. Else why was it kept up?

"You had better do your wandering within the stockades," he advised. "The woods aren't altogether safe for pleasure jaunts."

"Who would harm a silly head?" mumbled Gaspard.

"That's no protection. Your head might be taken off first and its sanity inquired into afterwards. That's a peculiar habit these roaming Nor'westers have."

"The Nor'westers!" echoed Gaspard Follet, in a strident scream, his whole face lighting with the gleam of certain knowledge born of suggestion. "One of them was the devil I saw in the Black Forest in the winter cabin. Name of the Virgin, how he frightened me! Now I remember well. It was the worst of them all. Any of you would have run as I did. Don't tell me you wouldn't! Ferguson sits in yon cabin!"

The floor shook with the spring of the men to their feet. Dunvegan had instantly leaped the length of the room and lifted the

dwarf in his hands, shaking him to search out the truth of the statement.

"Do you lie?" he cried tensely. "Speak! Is this an idiot's fancy?"

Gaspard wriggled. His face no longer bore vacancy of expression. The flush of real intelligence mantled it.

"No, by the cross," he vowed. "I speak truth. I know what I saw. If you think I lie, take me there. Should the Black Nor'wester not sit in the cabin as I say, you may kill me."

Because Gaspard Follet was above all things a coward, this offer forced immediate conviction upon the group. As the chief trader set the fool upon his feet, he turned and saw Malcolm Macleod's form bulking broad in the doorway.

"You have heard?"

"I have heard." The Factor's tone boomed out, savage, exultant. The order that followed was given with a swiftness as sinister as it was explicit.

"Take a dozen men," he directed briefly. "Bring me the Nor'wester, living or dead.

You understand?" Again he spaced the words for them: "Living—or—dead!"

Clement Nemaire swung wide the stockade gates. Bearing a forty-foot fur canoe, Dunvegan and his men filed out on their mission. The entrance closed behind the mysterious going.

"*Bon fortune,*" whispered Nemaire.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NOR'WESTER'S FLESH

A DEEPER blot within the shadow which the headland cast upon the water, Dunvegan's craft silently rounded Caribou Point, beached softly upon the sand in the granite-walled cove, and spilled its crew into the aisles of the Black Forest. Beyond rose the craggy ridge called Mooswa Hill, a landmark to the Hudson's Bay men in times of quiet, a pillar of fire when the Nor'westers struck.

The winter cabin Gaspard Follet had mentioned stood on a rock shoulder above the cove. Pine and spruce crowded it. In springtime the shore ice jammed to its threshold. The ooze and drip of the years were insidiously working its ruin. But still the halfbreed and the voyageurs sometimes used it for a night's shelter on their journeys.

Once it had saved the life of Basil Dreaulond in a great blizzard. Exhausted, he had reached it when he could never have made his remaining three miles to Oxford House.

A neck of the Black Forest hugged the incline where the hut stood. Marshy beaver meadows, fringing the Bay, hedged the timber line, spreading across to Mooswa ridge and giving no solid footing except what was afforded by a dam traversing the black water. This ridge fell away gradually to where Oxford House was reared, but reaching the Hudson's Bay post by land from Caribou Point was precarious business in the dark for no bridge, other than that which the beavers had built, spanned the morass. Hence the chief trader with his band had elected to come by water.

Very warily they emerged from the shelter of the tree boles into the clearing where the cabin rested.

"Lie down," commanded Dunvegan, in a whisper. "And go slow! The fellow may have friends with him."

They disappeared at once among the

rock ferns, worming noiselessly upon their faces toward the rough log shelter. The chinks of the logs streamed candlelight, but no sound came from within. The night seemed holding its breath. The intense stillness was broken only by the leap of maskalonge on the distant bars and the rubbing of elbows in the ferny brake.

At the cabin's corner the chief trader touched three of his followers upon the shoulder. Immediately they obeyed his unspoken command, slipping cat-footed round the hut one to the back one to either side. Possessed of sudden, sardonic humor, Dunvegan stooped and whispered in the ear of the dwarf whom they had taken at his word and brought along.

"Will you go in first?" he questioned, playing upon Gaspard's cowardly spirit.

The Fool shuddered and shied. Stifling a laugh, the chief trader thrust him to the rear of his line. His heavy kick flung the door back, and he leaped swiftly inside. The hut had an occupant! He rose from a block seat at the sudden intrusion, striding un-

certainly to the center of the floor. Neither man spoke. Dunvegan's followers trooped in.

The chief trader's glance searched out the stranger's armament, the rifle in the corner, the belt of pistols on the rude table. The pistols Dunvegan threw down at the butt of the leaning rifle. Then he whirled the table itself across that corner of the room, cutting off access to the weapons, and sat upon it. The tall, sturdily-built fellow watched him, unmoved. His crafty, blue eyes never wavered. He seemed conscious of no immediate danger.

"*Bon soir,*" he spoke finally, giving them the greeting of the North with a southern accent.

"It's not good," returned Dunvegan, curtly. "This is the worst night you ever struck in all your bad nights, Mr. Ferguson."

"Ferguson!" echoed the other in feigned surprise. Then he laughed cheerfully. "That isn't my name, and I'm not a Nor'-wester. I'm a Free Trader from the South.

A Yank, if you must know—from Vermont! I'll get out now that the Company has spotted me. I have some regard for my pelt. Come, act square with me. The H. B. C. always gives a man a chance. It's the first offense, you know. I'll turn my canoe south on the minute."

"Hardly," replied the chief trader, coldly. "There's some one waiting for you at Oxford House. You will not go far—if I am any judge of the Factor's designs." He folded his arms and swung his legs comfortably under the table.

To the Fool, he added: "Gaspard, is this the same person you saw?"

"By the Virgin, yes," quavered Follet, and hid himself behind Connear's bowed legs between which there was vision enough for his immediate needs.

"'Tis that devil of a Black Ferguson," the idiot piped from his vantage ground. "He frightened me; he frightened me." Breaking into a foolish habit of improvising rhymes, he shrieked:

"The devil's kin; the devil's son;

And all the devils rolled in one!"

Dunvegan silenced him with a word and addressed the Irishman.

"Burke," he asked, "can you corroborate this poor fool's statement? We want the right man. The Factor won't forgive any blundering."

"Fair as a Dane wid the same blue eyes! It's him. It's Black Ferguson."

"Do I look black?" demanded the baited man angrily.

"*Saprie!* We no be see you on de inside," was Basil Dreaulond's swift answer.

"I'm from the South," persisted the object of their quest, turning to Bruce. "A Free Trader, I tell you." His gestures were of irritation.

Dunvegan smiled a cold, triumphant smile. He delighted in the loss of his enemy's cool demeanor, in the failure of his self-possession.

"Ferguson," he began, "you're a weak liar. Your accent betrays you. We have you identified to our satisfaction, and your next interview will be with Macleod. I

warn you that this first meeting with the Factor may be your last and only one, so carry yourself accordingly!" Dunvegan broke off, waving an arm to his band. "Bind him!" he added.

The Hudson's Bay men closed in, but Black Ferguson fell back, a defiant sneer on his handsome face directed at the chief trader.

"One minute!" he parleyed insolently. "What's your name?"

"Bruce Dunvegan."

"I've heard of you," Ferguson sneered.

"Perhaps," chuckled the chief trader. "Most Nor'westers have. But I wouldn't advise you to resist my men unless you want to get roughly handled."

"I've heard of you," the other repeated tauntingly; "heard of you as one of the Company's bravest. Is this how you show your courage? You have one, two, three—nine, without counting the dwarf. And you spring upon a solitary man. Dunvegan, you're a cursed coward!"

Before Dunvegan had felt the depressing

gloom of the Nor'wester's shadow. Now he felt the flaming insult of the Nor'wester's flesh.

Under that insult his blood stung as under the stroke of a dog-whip. The scintillating fire grew in his darkened eyes. His teeth gleamed white between his drawn lips.

"Back, men," was his snarling command. "I never ask you to do what I'm afraid to do myself."

He leaped from the table and strode across to his enemy.

Black Ferguson stood perfectly still till Dunvegan was almost upon him. Then he plunged low with a wolf-like spring. What grip the Nor'wester took the other men never knew, but they saw the chief trader's big form whirled in the air under the tremendous leverage of some arm-and-leg hold. When he came down, Dunvegan was flat on his face upon the floor. Black Ferguson sat astride his back, pinning the chief trader's arms to the planks.

"You're quite helpless," Ferguson cried, laughing at his adversary and sneering at the

circle of amazed men. "That's a wrestler's trick. I learned it in—in Vermont. What'll you do about that binding? I fancy——"

A grip of iron on his throat killed the words. Ferguson gurgled and twisted his head, casting his eyes down to see whose hands held him. But there were no hands. Dunvegan had swept his muscular legs up over his back and crossed them in an unbreakable hold about the Nor'wester's neck.

Like lightning he swung them down with all the power of his sinewy body. Torn from his momentary position as the upper dog, Black Ferguson crashed to the floor. His head seemed nearly wrenched off. His breath was hammered out. Dunvegan crouched on his chest, choking him into submission, but even in this strait he had voice enough to spring his big surprise.

"La Roche! La Roche!" he roared in a gasping shriek which sounded more like the desperate death rattle in some wild throat than a human call. "To me, comrades! To me!"

Something dashed out the candlelight. A

gun roared in the doorway. The cabin rocked under a powerful assault. It all came in a whirl that dazed Dunvegan's brain. He heard the chug of bullets through the rotten logs, the oaths of his men, the battle cry of the rushing Nor'westers who had been craftily lying in wait.

"Damn you!" he cried to his prostrate antagonist, "this is your devilish trap!"

In a flash he understood that Ferguson had got wind of their coming and laid a trap for them. Dunvegan's force in his power, and Oxford House would be an easier prey! And Desirée Lazard an easier prey still! A madness seized Dunvegan. He vowed that Black Ferguson should pay the penalty! His fingers closed on the man's wind-pipe, but a falling beam hit him on the shoulder, hurling him away from his enemy and halfway through the door amid the rush of feet. There was little return shooting till Dunvegan squirmed into the open. Then he began it with his pistols, leading a dash for the canoe and shouting the Hudson's Bay cry.

Their guns belching fire across the dark,

the hardy band zigzagged among the trees, covering their retreat to the cove with a rattling fusillade that kept the pursuing Nor'-westers at a distance. Connear and Burke ran knee deep into the water with the big craft. Gaspard Follet was the first to leap in, but he sank clean through the bottom with a howl of dismay. Like a dripping rag they pulled him out, and Connear completely exhausted his store of sailor's expletives.

" Silence," ordered Dunvegan sharply. " What's wrong with you there?" The Nor'westers were shooting from the incline above the cove and their bullets spat in the water.

" Hole in her as big as a whaleboat," Connear growled. " We're caught in a trap, and those blasted Nor'west lubbers know it."

It seemed that the enemy had worsted them at every turn. The lake offered no means of escape, neither did the morass, and the Nor'westers held the slope. Dunvegan wondered why they had so easily fought their way to the canoe. Now he knew the reason.

The Nor'west leader thought that he had them hemmed in, that their extermination was already a decided fact. Then would come his surprise of Oxford House! The scoundrel was brainy, without a doubt. His ruse had been clever. But he had forgotten one thing—the topography of the country! There was a way out other than that up the incline and over the muzzles of the Nor'west rifles. The path lay across the black morass which ringed the Bay, and Dunvegan knew that path.

"Are we all here?" he asked suddenly of his men.

"All but Michael Barreau and Gray Eagle," Connear answered. "Someone caved in Michael's head with a gun stock; Gray Eagle was shot—I saw him fall! And old Running Wolf fired the shot!"

"The Cree joined them, eh? I expected that. Where's Maskwa?"

"Here, Strong Father," called the Ojibway fort runner. "What is your will?"

"You know the beaver dam, the wall across the meadows?" Dunvegan inquired.

"You remember it, the new dam we found some moons ago?"

"I remember well," Maskwa answered solemnly. "Did not Strong Father carry me over that——"

"Never mind," the chief trader interrupted hastily. "If you remember the place, lead these men to it. When you get across, hurry up Mooswa Hill and light the beacon. I'll come last! Now then, altogether with the guns! Give them a good volley to make them think we are preparing to storm. Then slip away."

The fusillade boomed and roared. Return volleys belched out. Oxford Lake rumbled and quaked with a million echoes. Like heavy artillery the black powder thundered. Then dead silence fell. Expecting instant attack, the Nor'westers lay close, but the inaction continuing, their scout worked down close to the beach and found it deserted. At that moment Dunvegan's file was crossing the long beaver dam.

The Hudson's Bay men had their guns slung to their backs. All except Maskwa

and the chief trader carried long poles in their hands, with which they saved themselves when they missed their footing and sank to the armpits in the rubbish of the structure.

Maskwa was leading the line. Pete Connear walked next. When they had reached the solid ridge and were waiting for the others, Connear poked the Ojibway's muscled back.

"What's that yarn you started to tell back there about bein' carried over this rickety dam?" he asked.

"The day of the great wind, three moons ago," began Maskwa unemotionally, "Strong Father upset with me in my canoe out in the big waters beyond Caribou Point. I took the bad medicine, the cramp, and the lake spirits nearly had me. But Strong Father swam out with me, pumped my breath back, and carried me over the dam of the little wise ones to the Company's post, for our canoe was in pieces on the rocks. Strong Father will not talk about it."

"By—the sailors'—god!" exclaimed Pete

Connear slowly. Then he whistled siren fashion in failure of further speech, while the tall Ojibway bounded like a spikehorn up the Mooswa Hill.

When the last of Dunvegan's men had crossed the bridge built by nature's children, swift Maskwa had accomplished his mission. As they ran down the ridge toward the post, the beacon flamed, a pillar of fire, against the dark sky.

On through the stockade gates under Nemaire's challenge they sped. And the Hudson's Bay stronghold shook itself into ready defense at Dunvegan's news. But although they lay upon their arms, no attack came. Ferguson's intent had miscarried.

Yet the surprises of the night were not done. When Macleod made search for his daughter to see if she could throw any light on recent Nor'west movements, he found her gone and his own canoe missing from the landing.

CHAPTER IX

WHO RULES HIMSELF

"YOU won your battle the other evening," remarked Father Brochet to Dunvegan a few days after. "Take care you do not lose this one."

Brochet's finger was levelled on the trail below the Hudson's Bay Company's store.

The chief trader stared and frowned. The two figures strolling over the path, Edwin Glyndon to his morning's business as clerk and Desirée Lazard for small purchases which were now growing very frequent, had been too much together of late to suit the chief trader's taste.

"Brochet," he spoke darkly, "I'm jealous of that fellow. I hate his cursed good looks, his woman's eyes, his easy manners! And

mark this, Father, I could have him drafted in a minute to our farthest post. Often I'm tempted to do it!"

The kindly priest laid a hand on Dunvegan's arm, feeling the chief trader's muscles tighten under his inward emotions.

"Son," Brochet observed, "these are strenuous hours with the agents of two great companies striving for the overlordship. But in the midst of all the conflicts, the defeats, the triumphs, who is the real victor?"

"The Hudson's Bay Company," declared Dunvegan loyally.

The priest laughed. "Not the material conqueror," he explained. "I mean what sort of spirit holds the real supremacy?"

"The man with the heaviest hand," was the chief trader's practical answer.

"No," Brochet contradicted, "the man who rules himself! If you sent away this handsome Edwin Glyndon out of envy, you would be only indulging your own petty hate. Conquer your passions, my son. That is the true kingship! If you cannot win a woman's will on your merits, don't

win it at all. No benefit ever came of such a victory gained by nothing but strength or craft."

Dunvegan paced uneasily in front of his trading room, his eyes glancing furtively toward the blank doorway of the store through which Glyndon and Desirée had disappeared.

"Yet I go this afternoon with my men to build Kamattawa, leaving a free field to him," he brooded. "Is that not giving Glyndon an advantage which you advise me not to take myself. The rule works both ways it seems to me."

"That," Brochet declared judicially, "is the natural course of things. The other is quite different. Have you any objection to his work as a clerk?"

"None! He handles the books and the pen better than any we ever had."

"Then it would be an injustice," the priest concluded. "Glyndon deserves his chance. How about his vice?"

"There is no opportunity to pamper his appetite here," laughed Dunvegan. "If

he were alongside the Nor'wester's free rum barrel, I would not answer for him. But I trust your judgment, Brochet. Things stay as they are. Now I must finish my trading with the Indians or I shall not get away on schedule."

"I intend paddling with you a little way to bid you farewell," the priest announced as he started over the trail. "It may be I shall have someone with me in my canoe."

His brown eyes twinkled. The suspicion of a smile curved his lips. Dunvegan, looking sharply at him, flushed, and a hopeful gleam lighted his countenance.

"Father," he said slowly, "you have wisdom beyond all years. That would please me very much."

He watched the portly form pass on and wondered at the big heart that beat under the black cassock.

"Dunvegan!" called the deep voice of Malcolm Macleod.

The chief trader turned about to see the Factor standing on the veranda of his house, the sunlight flooding his broad shoulders.

"How many Indians have yet to get their debt?" he asked.

"Twenty," Bruce replied. "Eight Ojibways and a dozen Wood Crees."

"Are they all in?"

"All but Running Wolf's tribe! The other Indian camps are ready to strike their tepees. The twenty men are waiting outside the yard."

"Run them off as fast as possible," the Factor ordered. "I'll attend to the preparations of your brigade myself in order that nothing may be lacking. Noon should see you started."

Dunvegan ascended the steps with a sigh.

"Oh, yes!" shouted Macleod, halting him. "What about Beaver Tail the Iroquois who failed to return the required value of pelts in the spring?"

"I cut him off the Company's book as you ordered."

"Give him his full debt," the Factor said. "The poor devil has been sickly, I understand, and not up to his usual prowess as a hunter. We'll let him have another chance!"

It was an unexpected freak of generosity in Macleod's adamant nature. The chief trader raised his eyebrows, expressing involuntary surprise, but he made no comment. From his trading room door he beckoned to the assembled group of Indian trappers beyond the tall palings enclosing the yard. A pair of Ojibways stalked forward, Big Otter, the great old hunter who had been on the Company's list for thirty years, and Running Fire, on the trail a scant three winters and just beginning to acquire fame as a trapper. In friendly fashion Dunvegan looked into their spare, smoky faces and hawk-like eyes which seemed to hold only surface lights.

" Running Fire, my brother," he commenced, " your debt on the Company's books is three hundred beaver. Here I give you three hundred castors to trade in what you will. Take them, my brother, and because you are so faithful on the hunt I add ten castors more. Does it satisfy you, Running Fire? "

" Surely," spoke the Ojibway. " Strong

Father has the kind heart. Behold when the snows melt will I bring him a pack mightier than ever."

He took the string of wooden castors Dunvegan offered and, nodding his satisfaction, strode off to the store where he would barter the counters which represented half-dollars in money value for the supplies he would require during his winter's hunt. There he would buy powder and ball, clothing, blankets. He would stock up with sugar, tea, and flour. A wonderful knife or axe might take his fancy. And what remained of his purse would be squandered on fascinating, but useless, finery.

Big Otter traded next. The way he leaned over Dunvegan's counter showed that they were old friends.

" Now comes my weak brother, he of the old limbs, the aged bones, the waning strength," bantered the chief trader. " For him there is a debt of one hundred castors recorded."

But Big Otter smiled at Dunvegan's joke, knowing that his limbs were sound as any

young buck's, remembering that his catch ran well over three hundred.

" Strong Father's tongue makes merry," he returned. " Where is the youthful brave who can follow my tracks? "

" I don't know him," admitted the chief trader, laughing, " but Running Fire is making a mighty name. Some fine day he may follow you."

Big Otter sniffed in contradiction. " Let us wait and see," he suggested.

Dunvegan passed over a string of castors longer than the previous one.

" Three hundred and fifty castors is your debt, great one," he smiled, " and to them I add twenty. Thus you stand high with us. But in return for the present you must tell me how you manage to keep your peace of mind, your strength of body."

The unweakened Ojibway chuckled quietly.

" I love not," he answered. " I hate not. I dream not."

Abruptly he strode out.

And Dunvegan, pondering, wondered if

ever was born the white man who could thus get his debt in life.

All the long forenoon the Indian trappers came to get their credit. The six remaining Ojibways filed up. Appeared the twelve Wood Crees. The emaciated Iroquois Beaver Tail came humbly and in gratitude. But Running Wolf's band from the Katchawan failed to arrive. Not a hunter of his tribe showed face in the palisaded yard. No canoe from his camps touched prow on Oxford shore.

Although Malcolm Macleod had before boasted his unconcern at such an issue, the confronting of the stern truth weighed upon his taciturn spirits. The Cree chief had fallen in with Black Ferguson's party and joined it, because he had been seen fighting in their ranks but a few nights earlier. The fact that none of his kind had reported showed that Running Wolf had reached them by messenger. Doubtless by now the fiery Three Feathers and his brethren had swelled the Nor'west forces.

This knowledge plunged Macleod in a

black mood. He rushed the preparations for the departure of the brigade. He commanded. He rebuked. He disciplined. He rated and cursed till even the hardy voyageurs sweated under the yoke. But when the noon hour was come, he had them marshalled on the beach all ready for their journey.

Loaded to the water's edge with supplies, dunnage, and arms, the big fleet of canoes pointed over Oxford's waters. The crowd cheered madly, dinning farewells and firing continual *feu-de-joies*. They thrilled at the sight of the brawn going forth to build Kamattawa to shut out the Nor'westers from the Valley. These looked able to do it; brown-armed white men; swarthy post Indians; the hardy *mètis;* the dashing voyageurs. The watchers' pulses leaped with admiration for the indefatigable leader who had travelled thus at the head of countless brigades on some stern mission for the Company. For him they raised a stormy cry of appreciation which was heartily echoed back by the men of the fleet.

But Dunvegan heeded not the uproarious approbation. The last glance he cast back centered on one handsome, smiling face in the throng, the face of Edwin Glyndon. Two other faces he missed, and his eyes looked ahead, searching the island-dotted expanse of water.

Many miles of silver surface Oxford Lake unrolled before them; many long, peaceful, shining miles! An intense calm mirrored it. The fiery, autumn sun glazed the whole. The vivid shores floated double along its sides. The sky lay down in its depths with great fish swimming among the white clouds; while so still swooned the water that the very veining and shading of color in the reflected foliage could be definitely traced.

As over silvered glass was the passing of the brigade. Each blotch of canoe bottom, each bit of overhanging duffle, each quivering sinew straining on the paddle flashed up from below.

Lightening the labor of their stroke, the debonair voyageurs broke into their familiar boating song:

" En roulant ma boule roulante,——"

And chanting more swiftly, they sang in voices which blended with the artistic charm nature alone can give:

" Ah fils du roi, tu es mèchant,
En roulant ma boule,
Toutes les plumes s'en vont au vent,
Rouli roulant, ma boule roulant."

By Windy Island they quickened their pace, chorusing loudly:

" En roulant ma boule roulante,
En roulant ma boule;
Derrière chez-nous y-a-t-un' ètang;
En roulant ma boule."

So the brigade went. And Oxford House crouched low in the distance.

CHAPTER X

THE CAUSE INVINCIBLE

OFF Caribou Point Wahbiscaw, the bowsman of Dunvegan's canoe, cried out sharply in his native tongue. The craft turned aside from a jagged reef of rock that poked like a pike's nose almost to the surface. Then they sped on with increasing rapidity. The Cree knew every channel, every fang, every shoal, every bar in the shallows of Oxford Lake. And of every other lake and river in his district there was a map in his mind.

It is the unequalled gift of the true red man to remember country over which he has travelled but once. Not only does he recall the trails or the waterways but the things which go to make those trails or waterways. He can place the smooth current, the broken, the rapid, the eddy, the

rocks, the bends of shore. Even the Indian youth quickly acquires such power of recollection. The retentive faculty is developed to an enormous degree by those who roam in the wilderness.

Ahead of the brigade loomed Wasita Island, a cliff of crag and spruce sunk to its knees in some volcanic crater which had opened under it aeons ago. Its headlands were scarred and seamed, old in time, marked with the brand of chaos that had once rocked the mighty northland as the tornado rocks the balsams.

Dunvegan, mechanically doing his work as steersman, scanned the shores for a glimpse of a canoe. At last he placed it on the island margin drawn up in a little cove called Spirit Bay. It was directly in the course of the brigade. His heart beats quickened.

"Faster," he commanded the paddlers, and steered closer to the island shore.

"Spirit Bay?" questioned the stolid Cree bowsman.

"So!" answered his leader. He made

a motion for the rest of the fleet to continue on its way.

The chief trader's canoe slipped over a white sandbar and nosed in against the rock alongside the other empty craft which required no tying in the absence of any lake swell.

"Behold the canoe of *ayume-aookemou,* the praying man," spoke Wahbiscaw, puzzled.

But with a command for him to wait in silence Dunvegan was climbing the rocks. Up on the peak of the boulder-like island he found Desirée and Father Brochet.

"See," she laughed, her beauty increased tenfold by the splendor of sun and sky, "we have come this far to bid you farewell. Are you not grateful? It is far to come to say a sentence or two!"

She gave him her hands, smiling saucily into his eyes. No vision he had ever seen or dreamed of was so entrancing, so tempting, and yet so human!

"Grateful? Ah—yes!" he breathed. "But pray God you may come this far to

meet me on my return! Would you?" He retained the hands that made him quiver.

"Who knows?" Desirée pouted teasingly. "The snows will be lying deep. You may come in a blizzard! Who knows?"

Like a red ring her lips allured. Father Brochet piously turned his back. If there was a passionate kiss, he did not see it. He heard only the heart strain in Dunvegan's voice; saw only the great yearning in his eyes.

"Your vow?" he asked. "Will you hold it till I come?"

"Yes—and after," she plagued.

"Till I come," Dunvegan pleaded.

"Yes," Desirée answered, softening. "I told you I would never marry a Hudson's Bay man."

"Keep it well, then," he adjured—"till I come!"

It took effort to release her warm palms! Dunvegan turned hastily to the priest.

"Good-bye, Brochet." Their hands welded.

"*A Dieu,*" murmured his friend.

There was a mist in Dunvegan's eyes as he walked. Father Brochet noted that he stumbled a little in reaching the canoe.

"Wik! Wik!" Wahbiscaw called. The craft slanted through the channel and was gone.

Brochet, watching closely, saw a great void grow in Desirée's eyes.

"Ah," he mused, "if this had been return!"

September smiled between the scarlet curtains of the moose maples upon Dunvegan's arrival in the Katchawan Valley. October glared through the bare lattice work of the branches at the upstanding walls of trading room, store and blockhouse. November swept wrathfully down the open forest lanes, blustering a frosty challenge to the hive of men toiling at the roofing over, the gabling in, the palisading.

But the challenge rang too late. Kamattawa's stockades grinned back undaunted. Behind them crouched the broad-bulked buildings, weather-proof, grim, impregnable

alike to destructive elements and predatory foes.

There still remained the finer inside work; the flooring, the store shelving, the compartment shaping, the counter making for the trading room, the stairs of the same and the grill in the supply loft above. But all this could be accomplished with comparative luxury in the warmth of the fireplaces whose birch flames crackled defiance to the cold.

The incidents of the Hudson's Bay men's journey to the Valley and the log of events during the post's building stand in bold orthography upon the daybook of the Fort. One hundred spacious pages the story covers. And because Bruce Dunvegan was not given to write of trifles, the sheets claim a sequence of bold facts which prompt the imagination with the allurement of boundless suggestion.

For instance, there is a line telling that they encountered a squall on Trout Lake. But the yellow paper says nothing of how for hours they bucked the monstrous seas which broke over the canoe bows till each

bailer's muscles cramped under the strain of clearing shipped water, or how the craft, sliding meteor-like down the passed surge crests, slapped and pounded in the wave troughs till the bottoms broke in rents and the daring crews won the shore race with death by a scant paddle's stroke.

Likewise a brief obituary states that Gabriel Fonderel was killed in a skirmish with some of Running Wolf's tribe at the Channel Du Loup. Yet there is no word of how the now hostile Crees, strong in numbers and led by the fiery Three Feathers held back Dunvegan's men for four days till finally the chief trader ran the rocky passage in the dark beneath a vicious fire that wounded a half-dozen voyageurs besides snuffing out Fonderel's breath.

Two burnings of the unfinished palisades by stealthy enemies; three night attacks of combined bodies of Nor'westers and Running Wolf's Crees; the finding of a full powder bag standing among the flour sacks drying before the fire—all these were mildly noted!

But between the brief lines of this day-book which reposed upon Dunvegan's desk in the trading room of Fort Kamattawa could be read the whole round of a virile, courageous existence; could be felt the pulse of danger and hidden menace; could be witnessed the keen drama of the inimical wilderness conflict. Crowded into these northmen's short span of months were years of endeavor. They took cognizance of no restraining limits to this and that undertaking. Theirs were the herculean things, the endless creations, the hot ambitions. Out of the vast resources of the northland they established a well-defined era, a cycle of supremacy, an epoch of undying history which would round their full conquest of the land.

The powerful instruments of their healthy bodies were applied by the shrewdness of their concentrated minds, guarded always by the blessing of sane leadership. Through his wise counsels Bruce Dunvegan conserved the powers of his retainers and turned them along the required channels, directing brain and sinew, blood and spirit, to the

profit of the Ancient and Honorable Company.

Over every part of the Fort hung his rigid, progressive discipline. At daybreak all the post Indians, the voyageurs, the H. B. C. servants were engaged upon their various tasks, fashioning, constructing, finishing! They labored with care, but with the merriest of dispositions. At seven they breakfasted. In an hour the hum of work rose again. Leisure could wait for the deep winter snows!

Outside the trading room a great flagstaff was reared before the ground froze too solidly. Up the pine stick ran the Company's crimson ensign, marking another step of conquest, flinging defiance to the Nor'westers, shutting out the stronghold of Fort La Roche from the Katchawan Valley.

Tumultuous cheering greeted the first flap of the banner. Shouts more sincere than patriotic cries rang out loudly. The Company's adherents but voiced their allegiance.

"*Vive La Compagnie!*" exulted the im-

petuous Baptiste Verenne, a typical voyageur.

"*Grace à Dieu!*" pealed his comrades, stridently—"*Grace à Dieu!*" Like some wild orison to an invisible god—the Company god it might be—their musical tongues chanted the phrase.

Could the Nor'westers have seen these outland sons thus greet their flag, chests big with the emotional breath of love, cheeks bright with the inspiring blood that comes of proud prestige, eyes burning with the fire of eternal loyalty, they would have stopped to think. Could Black Ferguson have witnessed the scene, he would have understood that he was combating not iron determination alone; not reckless strength, not unswerving pertinacity, but a stern faith in a power so vast as to be almost beyond conprehension; a belief in a precedence dominant and complete, a love of an ideal which even death could not conquer because it extended beyond through that exalted medium of heroism. And where the ideal is raised to the clear eye of faith rests the cause invincible.

CHAPTER XI

TIDINGS OF WAR

AS an auspicious omen on Kamattawa Indian summer came down with its fragrant sigh and its transient flash of yellow radiance. Then the winds fell strangely mute. Some unseen magic permeated the calm. Earth and air lay breathless with the prophecy of change.

A little cold caress on his tanned cheek, a tang on his lips, a familiar tingle in his sinews foretold the prophecy's fulfillment to Baptiste Verenne when he sauntered in one night from his trail-blazing. He inspected the sullen sky a moment and shook his head as he strode through the gates to the blockhouse.

"Wintaire!" he announced briefly to Dunvegan. "She be comin' *vite* on de *nord* wind, M'sieu'."

The chief trader tilted his browned face skyward and clutched the air tentatively to get the feel of the weather.

"Not far off! Not far off, Baptiste," he calculated. "It may close in any night, and we'll see a white world when we wake of a morning."

Verenne's arm slanted, pointing over the palisades.

"See dat?" he cried.

A circling wind, the first of many days, eddied the leaves lying against the stockade, piled them in a wreath thirty feet high in the air with gentle motion peculiarly distinctive to a close observer, then ruthlessly disintegrated the whole.

"An dat?" Baptiste added.

A whizzing phalanx of wild geese blurred the distant horizon, bored like a rocket from sky to sky, and pierced the invisible distance.

"W'en dey fly dat way," averred Baptiste, "de wintaire right on dere tails! She be come *toute suite,* M'sieu'."

And it did! A greasy wrack of clouds

masked the sunset. The north wind blew out of the Arctic circle with a humming like vibrating wires. The wraith of desolation went eerily shrieking round and round. Then out of inky space the snow came down, driving fiercely on a forty-mile gale to smother the gauntness of the rugged forest in a swirl of white. For thirty-six hours the frozen flakes pelted the stout stockades. The snow lay in foamy levels in the timber, ten feet deep in the hollows, and wind-packed to tremendous hardness on the ice-bound lakes and rivers.

The days became less strenuous now in Fort Kamattawa. The nights grew long. The Hudson's Bay men attended to their winter needs and equipments, while the post Indians fashioned snowshoes with native quickness and skill.

There came a brief, cold, sleety rain which settled the drifts and the subsequent hard frosts formed a crust that made excellent tripping on the raquettes. The first tripper over the trail was Basil Dreaulond carrying Company dispatches on his way to Nelson

House. He lurched in one night in the midst of a whistling storm with his dog team and a halfbreed assistant. The world outside the Fort was a shrieking maelstrom of snow and cutting blasts. Inside the men sat close together about the roaring fireplace.

So blinding was the tempest that Kamattawa's sentinel in the blockhouse tower could see nothing from his frosted windows and did not mark the courier's approach till Basil and the breed were hammering upon the closed gates with their rifle-butts. Eugene Demorel slid back the shutter in the watchtower and leaned out, his gun trained on the entrance.

"De password," he bellowed. "Who comes dere?"

"*Diable* tak' de password," roared Basil who was half frozen. "I'm Dreaulond. Open dis gate queeck!"

On the inferno of the elements his words puffed up like faint echoes, but Eugene Demorel knew the courier's tone. The stockade opened for a second, a raging

snowgap in the draught. Basil stumbled into the log store.

"*Holá, camarade,*" they greeted joyously. "How do you like the weather?"

"*Mauvais,*" groaned Dreaulond, leaning toward the flames. "*Saprie,* but she be cold!"

Dunvegan took the papers Macleod had sent to him and read them. They concerned ordinary matters of fort routine and gave him no news of the home post.

"How is everything at Oxford House, Basil?" he inquired with ill-concealed eagerness.

"Everyt'ing be quiet," returned the courier. "De Nor'westaires don' move mooch."

His eyes, however, held a hint of private information, and the chief trader did not miss the glance.

"Come to the trading room when you get warmed, Dreaulond," he requested. "I'd like to see you."

"*Oui,*" assented Basil. "W'en I get dis cold out ma bones."

Dunvegan disappeared. The Hudson's Bay men volleyed their questions at Dreaulond. They were ravenous for word of their kind from whom the busy months had cut them off. Between questions he slowly revolved before the fireplace, warming his chest, scorching his back, sucking the heat into his chilled marrow.

"Any news of the Factor's daughter?" Connear asked him.

"*Non!*" Basil frowned and added: "She's wit' Black Ferguson, I bet on dat. She got de spirit of her *père*. She'd go to La Roche an' mak' heem geeve her sheltaire."

"And Running Wolf gone over to him, too. We found that out. That whelp Three Feathers made it hot enough for us at Du Loup." Connear spat copiously into the snarling birch logs and grinned at the remembrance of the fight. "How's the English clerk?" he asked after a minute. "Drinkin' any?"

"Dey don' geeve heem any chance," replied Dreaulond. "Dat's de ordaire from

hees parents. An' we don't want drunk mans on de post at dis taim of de great dangaire."

In Basil's tone they discovered an unwonted gravity, as if he had knowledge of new developments which he was keeping from them.

"What's up?" asked Pete, always interested in secrets. "If there's anything on foot, let us have it, for it's got to be bloomin' dull here. I miss my grog. I'd give a month's pay for a good glass now."

"I don't know anyt'ing new," the courier returned. "Eef you want to grog, go ovaire to de Nor'westaire. Dey drink her pretty free."

"Yes. Black Ferguson swears by it."

"Dis Black Ferguson wan devil," declared Dreaulond, passing into the trading room. "Now he be run after Desirée Lazard, but she not be look at heem!"

From his desk Dunvegan glanced steadily at the courier.

"No letter, Basil?" He bit his lip on the question.

"*Non,*" replied his friend. "I'm sorry, me."

"Something's wrong," blurted the chief trader. "Tell me what it is. Has the Nor'wester had speech with Desirée?" Dunvegan's voice was strained, his fingers clenched white on the wood of his desk.

"Not dat," Basil explained awkwardly. "De dangaire is in anoder quartaire! Desirée an' dis Edwin Glyndon dey togedder mooch—ver' mooch. All de autumn taim dey canoe, dey walk, dey spik alone. Dat be not ma beezness! *Vraiment* dat none of ma affair. *Mais,* I t'ink you want know, mebbe, an' I be tell you w'at I see. Dey togedder all de taim!"

Dreaulond stepped to the door. His actions like his sentences were brief and full of significance. The chief trader's voice followed him, an odd, low tone the courier had never heard him use.

"Thank you, Basil," was his only comment. "Thank you, for that information."

Alone, he strode immediately into the darkness of his sleeping apartment where

He walked the floor, brooding gloomily. Dawn heard his footsteps still falling.

Three days after Dreaulond's departure for Nelson House Maskwa, the swiftest fort runner in the service, dashed over the bluffs, springing madly on his long, webbed running shoes. He had out-distanced the trio of breeds following with three dog teams, and he pushed dispatches of importance into Dunvegan's hands.

"Half our number leave to-morrow for Oxford House," the chief trader announced to his retainers as he read. "Men from two of the Nor'west posts, Brondel and Dumarge, have sacked our fur trains from the Shamattawa and the Wokattiwagan. The Factor will go to raze Fort Dumarge. We outfit at Oxford House and move against Fort Brondel."

A cheer hit the rafters. Unprecedented activity followed. The breeds blew in with the exhausted giddés. Recuperation came to these Company dogs with the night's rest, and into the bitter dawn they were haled. The cold struck nippingly at bare

fingers that loaded arms and travelling necessities on the sledges, lashed the moosehide covers over the provender, and tied the stubborn babiche knots. Likewise the frost squeezed the hands that harnessed the dogs. The giddés themselves whined and stirred uneasily in the cold. They were eager for the rush that would make their blood run warm.

Those of the Fort who were to stay behind helped in the work. Long practice and consummate skill accomplished starting preparations in the shortest possible time. The dog teams sprang through the gateway at the release, and a shout of farewell thundered.

"*Bonheur, camarades!*" was the word. "*A Dieu! A Dieu!*"

"*Pour* Shamattawa! *Pour* Wokattiwagan!" rang the responses from the loyal Hudson's Bay men.

"*Marche! Marche!*" called the breeds to the *giddés,* and the cavalcade swung over the long trail.

CHAPTER XII

"YOU MAY COME IN A BLIZZARD!"

"VOYEZ *les* Kamattawa trains," shrieked Maurice Nicolet, the cache runner, speeding through the storm-thrashed gates of Oxford House.

"*Mon Dieu,* dat so?" exclaimed Clement Nemaire. "In dis blizzard? W'ere you be see dem, Maurice?"

"'Cross de *lac!* W'en de snow she stop fallin' some, I see dose trains wan meenit come ovaire de trail."

"Run!" Nemaire admonished. "Tell de Factor dat, queeck!"

The cache runner bolted into the trading room. Macleod was not there. Donald Muir, the assistant trader, held charge.

"*Les* Kamattawa trains," he howled. "M'sieu', dey be come ovaire de *lac.*"

Bargaining ceased. Trade slipped from the men's minds. Donald Muir jumped up and squinted through the open doorway, distinguishing nothing in the swishing cloud-rifts of snow. He turned back with a shiver and jammed the latch viciously.

"Maurice, ye fule," he ridiculed. "I've na doot ye'll be seein' ghosts next! Ye dinna glint onything but a herd o' caribou driftin' before the storm."

"*Bâ, oui,*" persisted Nicolet, "w'en de storm she be sheeft wan leetl' bit an' de cloud break oop, I see dose trains 'cross de *lac. Vraiment,* dat's so!" Maurice nodded his head energetically and added a string of French superlatives.

"Fetch me the glass," ordered old Donald Muir.

A man brought the glass, a long ship's telescope which Pete Connear had bestowed upon Oxford House. In spite of having seen hard service, it was a good glass, and the same lens that had picked out many a foresail upon the high seas now searched the whirling smother which enveloped the

frozen surface of Oxford Lake for signs of the men from Kamattawa. Donald Muir wedged the rattling door with his knees and sighted through the open slit, the hissing snow-eddies spitting in his beard.

"Yon's a glint o' dogs!" he exclaimed. "Noo the snaw's smoorin' in. I doot, I doot—Ah! yes, I maun believe ye're richt, Nicolet! Aye, mon, ye're richt. I can tell the stride o' yon lang-legged fort runner Maskwa an' the bulk o' Dunvegan. Spread yersels, ye fules—they're here!"

Boring through undeterred, breaking the trail for the teams, taking the brunt of the blizzard came the tireless Ojibway fort runner. The body bent double against the wind, the lurch of hips, the spring from the heel, the toe-twist of the lifting shoe, all bespoke the experienced tripper. Maskwa was old and wise on the trails!

A string of gray dots, the dog teams and the Kamattawa men crawled after. Up the bank they plunged and scurried through the stockade, scattering the loose drifts like foam.

"Hu! Hu! Hu!" shrieked the Indian dog drivers, directing the teams to the trading door with a tremendous cracking of their long lashes. There the *giddés* halted, whimpering in the traces. The arms and equipments were thrown inside. The storm-harried travelers stumbled after.

"Maurice, ye fule," fumed Donald Muir, "fire up. Dinna stan' there wi' yer mouth open! Fire up, mon, fire up! Can ye no see it's heat they want?" The fussy, kind hearted assistant trader seized Dunvegan's arm and hustled his superior to his room where he had thoughtfully prepared a set of dry garments.

"Yon's wha' ye need," he declared. "Ye'll feel warmer wi' a change." His attitude was full of solicitude hidden by a sort of propietorship that Dunvegan had long ago come to recognize.

"You're like a mother to me, Donald," he laughed. "But I'm really wet through with hard work. The change of clothing is well thought of."

"The Factor wants tae confer wi' ye as

soon as ye feel fit," announced the Scot. "I masel maun see tae the outfits."

He bustled off, sending halfbreeds with the dog teams to the log building where the Company's *giddés* were kept, ordering food for men and animals, bestowing general comfort upon the Kamattawa stalwarts crouched around the fireplace.

Sandy Stewart, the lowland Scot, had been left in charge of the newly-built Fort. The rest of Dunvegan's tired followers were here. The flames licked the bronzed, familiar faces of Pete Connear, Terence Burke, Baptiste Verenne, Maskwa, Wahbiscaw, the hardy halfbreeds, the trusted post Indians, the faithful *mètis.*

Loyal to the Company, they were here at the Company's call. And they had come as Desirée Lazard had idly prophesied.

"Kip back," Maurice Nicolet ordered the Oxford House loungers round the fire. "Let dese men have more room. You be well fed, warm—full of *tabac* smoke. Kip back. Better go ovaire to de store."

The permanent group obeyed. The new

arrivals moved closer. Maurice stoked up, jamming huge birch logs into the cavernous stone pit till it roared and throbbed like a giant engine. Every flicker of the warming fire draught sent the shivers over their frames, the reaction that comes of thorough chilling.

"Ba gosh," chattered Baptiste Verenne, "dis ees de wors' blizzard yet. *Saprie,* leesten dat, *mes camarades*!"

A tree crashed thunderously in the forest. Gathering momentum over the level sweep of Oxford Lake, the blasts struck the stockade with a sound like the rumbling of a thousand ice jams. The buildings rocked to the storm's wrath. Monstrous drifts threatened to bury them completely. The baffled frost, denied entrance, blew its angry, congealing breath inch-thick upon the blurred window panes.

"Sound lak de spreeng, eh?" grinned Baptiste.

"We'll run into a calm in the morning," Pete Connear prophesied knowingly. "She's been blowin' for fifty hours now.

You'll see the wind drop about midnight."

Verenne made a gesture of unbelief. "Mebbe," he grunted, "mebbe."

"I know it," growled Connear. "Let me tell you, Frenchy, that I've weathered more gales than you ever heard of. It'll be calm to-morrow and colder than a Belle Isle iceberg." He lighted the pipe he had filled and lay back within the heat circle blowing clouds of contentment.

Dunvegan dressed hastily. He was anxious to get out and go through his interview with the Factor in order that he might then have some time to pay a visit to a certain small cabin below the Chapel. He had not seen Edwin Glyndon, the clerk when he came in. Bruce wondered jealously if the young Englishman was at the Lazard home. The words of Basil Dreaulond, given as a friendly hint, had worked in him with the yeast of unrest, stirring up misgivings, forebodings, positive fears.

When Bruce crossed the trading room, he looked for Glyndon again, but the latter was not to be seen.

"Where's the clerk?" he asked, addressing his retainers sprawling close to the ruddy logs in the fireplace.

"Don't know," Connear answered. "I haven't seen him. Guess he's with the other Oxford House men. They're over at the store. Old Donald's gone across to start the packing."

"Better have your things dry and your gear all ready to-night," was the chief trader's parting advice. "Unless there is a change of plans, we start at dawn for Fort Brondel."

While he made his way to the Factor's house, the terrific wind seemed lessening in velocity, and the snow was settling in straighter lines. Yet the swaying forest held its dejected droop. The air had still that voice of wild desolation, symbolic of sorrow, of heart-break, of desecration.

Seated somberly at the table in his council room, Malcolm Macleod did not speak at Dunvegan's entrance. The chief trader, quite accustomed to the Factor's vagaries, waited unconcernedly, on Macleod's whim.

Buried in his dark ruminations, the Factor sat immovable, his knitted eyebrows meeting, his piercing black eyes focused on the table center. Suddenly he banged the top with his fist.

"The girl Flora," he bellowed. "Any trace, any sight of her?"

"None," Dunvegan answered calmly. "I don't think we'll see her again till we stand inside the stockades of Fort La Roche."

"Which will be soon," grated Macleod, with sinister emphasis. "I'll stand there, mind you, before spring runs out. I swear it by all the saints and devils of heaven and hell!" The oath was heartily backed by his malignant face and the suggestive gnash of strong teeth behind tightened lips.

The chief trader drew some closely written sheets from his pocket.

"Here is my report," he ventured by way of getting Macleod's mind lifted from his hateful brooding. "This is the record of my daybook in duplicate. It will tell you everything. While good fortune blessed us

at Kamattawa, things seem to have gone badly with you here."

"Gone badly," echoed the Factor, sneeringly. "I call the loss of two fur trains, ten men, and a clerk hellish."

"Clerk? Was Glyndon with them? Did he fall in the fight?" Eager curiosity was mingled with Dunvegan's great astonishment.

"No," growled Macleod, "he wasn't with the fur trains. How could he be? Just a week ago to-day he married Lazard's niece, and they fled together."

CHAPTER XIII

A VOW THAT HELD

AS a man who gets a knife blade in the ribs Dunvegan settled back in his chair. In spite of his tremendous self control, the pallor crept up through his tan. His eyes widened and remained so, staring glazily. The Factor could not help but notice the change. He gazed a moment above the pages he held.

"What's the matter?" he demanded in genuine surprise. Then recollection coming, he added: "Yes, I remember now. Let that be a lesson to you, Dunvegan. Don't trust a woman out of your sight! I speak from hard experience."

The chief trader pulled his pithless limbs together with an effort.

"There is a mistake somewhere," he began in a quiet, hollow voice. "What you say cannot have happened."

"Why?"

"As you know, Desirée's feeling leaned toward the Nor'westers. She registered a vow that she would never marry a Hudson's Bay man."

"Neither did she!"

"Great God," breathed Dunvegan, "don't fool with riddles! Speak it out!"

"She didn't marry a Hudson's Bay man," Macleod asserted grimly. "That damned traitor of a Glyndon turned Nor'wester and fled. Now do you understand?"

Amid a tumultuous rush of mingling feelings, condemnation, anger, jealousy, despair, Dunvegan understood to the bitter full. For several silent minutes he sat there, fighting his conflicting emotions, getting a grip on himself. The Factor read on at the duplicate sheets with stolid absorption.

"Who married them?" was the question that interrupted. Dunvegan had forced his vocal chords into mechanical action.

"Father Brochet," muttered Macleod, not looking up.

"And where are they, do you know?"

"Not I," snarled the Factor, stopping his study of the report. "Most likely they are now in the Nor'west fort at La Roche."

"With Black Ferguson! Oh my God!" Bruce leaped to his feet and paced and repaced the council room with long, savage strides. The Factor watched him, smiling cynically, as if at the discovery of some new trait in the man. A dozen times the chief trader tramped the floor. Then he whirled in the middle of a stride.

"This thing was planned," he averred. "The clerk was approached from the outside."

"I know that." Macleod's eyes darkened and narrowed a little.

"By whom?"

"It is obvious."

"The Nor'westers—directly?"

"Undoubtedly." The Factor laid down the report upon the council table. Dunvegan resumed his frantic walk, again pausing uncertainly.

"But the means—the means!" he exclaimed petulantly.

Macleod's teeth snapped shut and opened grudgingly for his speech.

"Ha!" he gritted. "God pity the means—if I discover it! We have had spies sneaking about Oxford House. Sometimes I think they must have been inside the stockades, although that is a wild thought. Be this fact as it may, the truth remains that Glyndon was approached directly by an agent of the Nor'westers. Under the powerful combination of the enemy's inducements and the girl's persuasions his desertion must have been a comparatively easy matter."

"Curse his soft eyes!" cried the chief trader. "We might have known better than trust him. Good Lord, and they sent him away from London temptations in order that the Company might give him a certificate of manhood! How, in heaven's name, could a man be made from a bit of slime, a rotten shell, and a colored rag? Betrayal must have been born in him! Did you order no pursuit?"

The Factor shook his shaggy hair as he gathered up the papers.

"They had twenty hours start and good dogs," he explained. "Besides, they fled while it was snowing and left no trail."

"Where's Brochet?" demanded Dunvegan suddenly and irrelevantly.

"Somewhere down Blazing Pine River on a mission to sick Indians," Malcolm Macleod replied. "He left shortly after it happened."

At the end of this questioning, with the little dream-things he had fashioned scattered to the far compass points as the blizzard outside had scattered the snow flakes, Dunvegan felt the sickening of supreme despair. No visible resource stretched before him. He relapsed into sullen inertia.

"Is this all?" the Factor asked, placing his duplicate sheets in numbered sequence.

"All but one other thing."

"And that?"

Dunvegan hesitated. "When I brought Flora Macleod and Running Wolf here," he commenced awkwardly, "I met a strange canoe on Lake Lemeau. In that canoe with two Indian paddlers were two United States marshals named Granger and Gar-

field. Their passes were good. Their papers I requested of them."

The chief trader paused to note the effect of his words on Macleod. But there was no effect except that the Factor had squared his bulk in his council chair as if to face an emergency.

"Go on," he urged grimly.

"It seemed they were searching for a man whom they suspected of living in this wilderness under an assumed name. They had his photograph!"

Malcolm Macleod shifted forward in a startled fashion.

"You saw that photograph?"

"I did."

"You knew it?"

"No."

The movement of the Factor's body was swiftly reversed. He breathed deeply with something of relief, a relief that fled at the chief trader's next statement.

"I did not know the original of the picture," Dunvegan asserted, "but I was told who it was."

"By whom?" The question shot like a bullet.

"By Flora Macleod. Privately, you understand! Her information was given me after these two marshals had gone."

"Whose picture was it?" Macleod asked doggedly, with the manner of putting an issue to the test.

"Your own," the chief trader answered, "at the age of thirty."

Expecting a dynamic outburst, Dunvegan was completely surprised at the Factor's stoic composure. The massive limbs never offered to spring from the chair; the face preserved its rigid, inscrutable lines.

"You were satisfied with that information, were you?" Macleod interrogated.

"Yes."

"It satisfies you still?"

"It does."

"You did not mention the circumstance at the time," the Factor went on. "Why refer to it now?"

Dunvegan leaned his arms on the table

directly opposite Macleod, meeting unafraid the piercing glances of those electric eyes, the eyes which he could now recognize as belonging to the original of the photograph.

"Because it is now necessary," he answered. "If it were not, I would not have opened the subject. In the space of another day, or two, those deputies, will make Oxford House. At this moment they are laid up beyond Kabeke Bluffs, not caring to face the blizzard. We passed them there."

Macleod was half out of his chair, an unspoken question blazing from those magnetic eyes. Dunvegan answered it with hauteur and a little scorn.

"I'm no informer," he declared. "Somehow they've got trace of you at the other forts. These men had official entry to both Hudson's Bay and Nor'west posts, and they must have covered the territory pretty well."

"Why do you tell me this?" demanded Macleod, with sudden asperity.

"Out of a sense of duty."

"You think me a hunted criminal?"

The Factor's tone held resentment and bitterness which was probably impersonal.

"I forbear to think," answered Dunvegan. "Your affairs are none of my business."

"Yet you serve me! Why serve a man with a supposed stain upon him? Why not follow, rather, our friend Glyndon's move?"

"I serve the Company," was the chief trader's response. "The moral status of the Company's officers cannot effect that fundamental duty—service."

The Factor looked long at Dunvegan, marveling at his integrity, his lack of low curiosity, his allegiance.

"Bruce," he said—and it was not often he used the Christian name—"you're one of the true, northern breed, the shut-mouthed men! Let me tell you a little phase of American life. Twenty years ago there lived over there in one of the big cities a family by the name of Macfarlane. The family consisted of the husband and wife, a daughter, and a son. There was also an intruding element, and this intruder was

named James Funster. You see, Funster had loved Macfarlane's wife before she married, and even after the marriage he could not like an honorable man get over his passion. Do you follow me?"

Dunvegan nodded. He had guessed this much from former hints Macleod had given him.

"Well," continued the Factor, "project your thoughts ahead. Imagine the mad things that come into the brain of the infatuated. Imagine also Macfarlane's horror at what happened. One day he was away with his daughter. On his return he found his wife murdered and the son stolen. Without a doubt it was Funster's work. But notice how Fate acted! Suspicion fell upon the husband, suggesting the motive of jealousy. He fled, and the blot still rests on his name.

"How old were the children?" asked Dunvegan, excitedly.

"They were very young," Macleod answered evasively; "just a year between them. I think I have said enough to show you that I am no criminal. That was twenty

years ago, but the false accusation follows me."

"And you," ventured Bruce—"you are Macfarlane!"

"I am Alexander Macfarlane."

"And where is Funster?"

"Ah!" grated Macleod. "Tell *me* that."

Dunvegan rose up, his own sorrow overshadowed by the portentous resurrection of an old tragedy.

"You are innocent," he cried, "and those men will be here to-morrow or the next day."

"And to-morrow, or the next day I shall be at Fort Dumarge!"

"But they can follow."

"Let them! Or let them await me here! What good will it do? They came in on a long trail, but by Heaven they may go out on a longer one."

Dunvegan stared at the dark, glowering visage and shivered involuntarily.

"What one?" he asked under his breath, although he knew.

"*La longue traverse,*" the Factor decreed.

CHAPTER XIV

THE IRON TRAIL

PLUFF! Pluff! The crunching of Maskwa's snowshoes sounded back through the bitter starlight of the dawn. Taking advantage with his skilful heel-spring of the resilience of the taut shoe webbing and the elasticity of the curved frames, Maskwa ran easily in a long, lurching stride. The shifting of his whole weight from one foot to the other sank his raquettes in the snow with uniform pressure. The ankle's side-swing came with unfailing precision. The Ojibway traveled like a machine, perfectly poised and full of potential strength. Thus he could run if need be from sun to sun.

Behind him in the broken trail galloped the first of the six dog teams that carried the outfits. Five halfbreed track beaters

packed the snow in front of the other sledges. Six Indians drove. At intervals the positions were shifted, each team taking its turn at the lead where lay the heaviest toil.

"Mush! Mush!" cried the Indian dog drivers. Crack! Crack! snapped the whips in weird staccato. These sounds with the noises of travel were the only ones to echo through the white stillness. For the rest the Hudson's Bay men went in silence because the cold was that awful cold that strangles the northern world before sunrise. Its frigid hands seemed to catch their chests and clamp their lungs tight. A gauntlet removed to allow the fastening of a moccasin lace, the adjustment of the parka hood, or the clearing of iced eyelashes left the bare fingers numbed by the cruel frost which bit through the flesh and lacerated the tense nerves beneath. Through many a dawn-hour had these northmen fought this freezing horror. On countless trails had they come face to face with this death masked ice spirit. Well they knew their capabilities.

Closely they guarded their energies. With all his relentless power and subtlety the frost fiend might not take them unawares!

Steadily moved the long line of men across the wind-packed surface of Oxford Lake, their bodies leaning forward at identical angles, their limbs swinging with machine-like regularity. Shoulders heaving at their collars, the dog teams ran in their own peculiar fashion, heads down, tongues lolling between steaming jaws. So exactly alike the outfits seemed that the hindmost ones might have been the oft-repeated shadow of the foremost brushing back across the snows, indistinct, vague beneath the waning starlight.

Quitting Oxford Lake at Kowasin Inlet, the trains ascended Kabeke Ridge that they might make the descent on the other side to the smooth ice of Blazing Pine River which would afford them easy progress for many miles. Among the trees of the crest the cavalcade lost definition. The men were merely shadows on the snow, flicking ghost-like between the silhouetted tree trunks.

The dogs were wolfish things sneaking low to the ground. The utter silence of the morning was ethereal in its intangibility. Sharp detonations of frost-split trees brought contrasts that ripped the screen of silence with weird, unearthly noises. A phosphorescent glimmer smeared the crust. Little shadowy shapes began to dance before the men's snow-stung eyes. A suggestion of mirages drifted here and there, mocking, oppressive, supernatural, phantasmagoric.

Where the course of march led from the elevated ridge to the low river surface the incline fell so sharply that extreme care was necessary to make the descent in safety. The Indian dog drivers whipped up their teams to force them in a direct line, while some clung to the sledges that they might not break away wildly and over-run the rushing *giddés*. The plunge beat up a cloud of foaming snow particles. Sled after sled shot down. The men half coasted, half ran with amazing speed on the feathery slope. An immense groove in the white covering of the mountain side showed after them. They

turned down Blazing Pine, on the banks of which was the Indian encampment that Father Brochet had gone to visit in his mission of administering to the sick.

Maskwa, the tireless, still broke the trail. Dunvegan sent forward Black Fox, a sinewy Salteaux Indian, to relieve him for a space, but the Ojibway smiled a little and refused.

" Strong Father," protested Black Fox, dropping back, " this Maskwa the swift one will not listen. Nor will he give me the task. His legs are of iron, and his lungs are spirit's lungs—they breathe forever! Strong Father, there is none like him from Wenipak to the Big Waters."

" That's true, Black Fox," commented the leader of the expedition, " but he should take some rest."

Dunvegan sped forward till he was running side by side with the Ojibway.

" Maskwa, my brother," he urged, " take the easy place for an hour. It is not well to punish yourself! "

The fort runner smiled again. He had

ideal features for an Indian, and the stamp of noble lineage was set upon the bold curve of brow, nose, and chin.

"Strong Father," he replied, "it is not hard for me. I will keep on, for I would have my own eyes search the trail ahead. There are spies about. Let Strong Father mark how the fur trains were sought out and set upon! Mark how the French Hearts took council to surprise Oxford House! We have need to keep the clear eye. We must go swiftly but craftily. Therefore, Strong Father, let Maskwa have the lead. His sight will not fail you."

The Ojibway's dark face glowed earnestly in the golden haze of light which heralded the near appearance of the sun. He was running as easily and breathing as quietly as he had done in the first mile they traversed.

"As you will," conceded Dunvegan. "You have my trust!"

The chief trader dropped back in turn with the main body. Maskwa spurted far ahead, performing the duty of scout as well

as that of track beater. Before the Nor'westers could compass another surprise they would have to reckon with the cunning Ojibway.

Steadily on went the file of dog trains. The men were feeling the cold less. By this time extreme exertion had infused a warm glow in each man's frame. Every part of the human anatomy responded to the strong blood coursing in the veins. An excess of virile strength permeated the muscles. An effervescence of buoyancy toned up the nerves.

Eyes gleaming brighter for the fringe of filmed ice above, lips blowing cloud-breaths, clothes frost rimmed from over-activity, these Hudson's Bay giants held on their way. Soon they came to the branching of the Blazing Pine River and continued down the tributary which curved by the Indian village lying three hours' journey below the junction point.

At last the belated sun rose over the spruce trees, glaring with a sort of amazed, fiery wrath upon these travelers who had

taken advantage of his slumber to win so many miles of their hard march. But the wrath subsided, lost in the rosy day dreams that wrapped earth and sky in a brilliant winter mist. Radiating beams created the impression of cheerful heat. The whole range of imaginable colors, multiplied by tinting and blending, wove and shifted in a vast web of living fire across the opal clouds. A stupendous panorama lay the wilderness world, exhaling color, displaying jewels, wrapping itself in beauteous necromancy!

In the late forenoon Maskwa sighted the Indian village in the middle distance. Dunvegan decided to make mid-day camp there. He gave the order to his men, an order that was received with great alacrity.

"*Chac! Chac! Chac!*" yelled the drivers to the *giddés*, enforcing the order with splitting reports from the long lashes of their dog whips.

Gleefully and dutifully the sledge animals turned toward the Cree tepees pitched permanently in the warm shelter of a pine

forest to the left of the river. At the thought of rest, a good meal, and a smoke the Hudson's Bay men dashed forward jauntily, eager to make the bivouac. But an Indian, running out of the winter wigwams, stopped Maskwa from entering the village by a peculiar motion of his crossed hands. The others saw the fort runner halt in his tracks and draw away, while a momentary conference in the native dialect took place.

The Ojibway beckoned to Dunvegan who ran up hastily.

" Strong Father," spoke Maskwa quickly, " an Indian has come to this village and he has fever. We cannot enter. Else will the fever spirit destroy our own men."

" Where's Father Brochet? " Bruce demanded, speaking in Cree. " Where's the priest—the praying man. Bid him come forth! "

On the summons Father Brochet appeared. His greetings were none the less cheerful for the distance that intervened between the friends.

"It wouldn't be wise to come in," the priest called, "and risk exposure to infection. This case isn't so bad, but you know the dangers. The Indian came from the tribe on Loon Lake, and some of his fellows up there are sick with the same thing. When I get him in shape so that the Indian women can bring him through, I am going up to see after the others."

"Loon Lake!" exclaimed Dunvegan. "That's up beyond Fort Brondel. You'd better be careful when you are in the Nor'-west haunts."

"The Nor'westers don't trouble the men of God," returned Brochet simply. "I have no fear of them! We are indispensable to both Hudson's Bay servants and Nor'westers!" He smiled grimly at the significance of his plain words.

"But lately men on our side have died unshriven," the chief trader observed bitterly. "There is a chance that the same may happen to the enemy."

"You are heading for Brondel?"

"With all haste! The sack of the Wokat-

tiwagan train will be speedily and thoroughly avenged."

"And the Factor has set out to raze Dumarge as he planned?"

"Yes. We both have hoped to surprise the Nor'west forts for, failing that, we must sit down to a long siege."

Brochet shivered a little even in the sheltered place where he stood.

"It is ill weather for a siege," he commented, "and the Nor'westers are as cunning as wolves. You know, I suppose, about—about Glyndon?"

Dunvegan's face was hard as a mask. By this time he had curbed his emotion tightly.

"I know—that is, I heard," he answered slowly. "Tell me all about that marriage, Brochet!"

The priest raised his hand in a deprecating fashion and shook his head out of sad pity for his friend's disappointment.

"There is nothing to tell," was his low response. "It was a swift, eager wooing—a sort of autumn dream! The golden woods and the white moons were theirs for an un-

interrupted, rapturous space. The fascination was intense. Its durability I cannot judge. The climax compelled their marriage. My hope is that Glyndon may prove worthy!"

"Amen," Dunvegan breathed. He seemed desirous of hearing no more, and signaled for the trains to move on.

"If on your return from Loon Lake the Company's banner flaps over Fort Brondel, give me a call," was his parting word to Father Brochet.

"Indeed, yes," the kindly priest promised. "And watch carefully, my son! Guard your person against the enemy, and guard your passions as well. Remember that he who conquers himself is greater than the lord of all the Hudson's Bay districts."

Three miles farther the cavalcade wound with the frozen river. Dunvegan, brooding within himself as had been his custom of late, took little note of its progress. The leadership had devolved for the moment upon Maskwa. Presently the tall Ojibway answered the call of his stomach. He stop-

ped beneath a jutting headland and looked once at the sun. Then with his native stoicism and abruptness he twisted his heels from the loops of his snowshoes.

"Camp here!" he decided.

CHAPTER XV

MASKWA'S FIND

A FORK of fire leaped up under the quick hands of the Indians. The dead spruce boughs crackled merrily. Baptiste Verenne lay back on a pile of green branches before the flames and hummed to the kettles that they might the more quickly melt their contents of snow into steam and boil the tea. His high tenor voice chanted the air of *L'Exilé,* a song of far-off France. Very softly and dreamily he sang:

"Combien j'ai douce souvenance
Du joli lieu de ma naissance!
Ma cœur, qu'ils étaient beaux, les
jours de France!
O mon pays! sois mes amours,
O mon pays! sois mes amours. Tou-
jours!"

Over the spruce fire the kettles began to drone to his music as he went on more tenderly:

"Te souvient-il que notre mère,
Au foyer de notre chaumière,
Nous pressait sur son cœur joyeux
Ma chère?
Et nous baisions ses blancs cheveux.
Tous deux."

Almost while Baptiste sang, the meal was ready. The Hudson's Bay men thawed their strips of jerked caribou over the coals and washed the meat down with small pails of hot tea. They snatched a few whiffs from their pipes before the command to march was given.

The afternoon sun shed abundance of light but afforded no warmth. The traveling was through a cheerless cold that intensified by degrees. The toil of marching had begun to tell on the men; they moved with less elasticity, their limbs began to lag as from some indefinable hindering pressure. This pressure seemed to come from without

like unfriendly hands holding them back, but they knew it was really the weakening fibers protesting from within.

Only three of the travelers were untouched by this peculiar lethargy. Maskwa ran as ever with his unchanging, lurching stride. Dunvegan, knowing not the hint of weariness, traveled mechanically, his mind dwelling on personal things. And Baptiste Verenne still hummed of his sunny France, asking:

" Te souvient-il du lac tranquille
Que' effleurait l'hirondelle agile,
Du vent qui courbait le roseau Mobile,
Et du soleil couchant sur l'eau. Si beau?
Ma cœur, te souv——"

" G'wan, Baptiste, ye Frinch rogue," cried Terence Burke, " ye've no sister here to ask that. An' phwat the divil's the use o' askin'? Shure it's not France but Greenland we're in. An' it's on a howly treadmill o' snow we're walkin'."

Pete Connear kicked the Irishman's calves from behind with the toes of his snowshoes.

"Walk faster, man," he urged. "It makes it twice as easy and the frost doesn't touch you then."

But Terence shivered in the trail. The sweat of the morning's travel had chilled on him at the noonday halt, and he felt the lowering temperature keenly.

"It's so beastly cowld," he groaned dismally, "that me thoughts freeze 'fore Oi can ex-press thim."

The sailor kicked him again to cheer him on. "Bucko! Bucko!" he growled.

And Baptiste Verenne, smiling, flashed white teeth over his shoulder and remarked:

"Mebbe you don' lak remembaire somet'ing lak dat in your own countree! Eh, dat so, M'sieu Burke?"

Terence frowned. Baptiste's smile grew more mischievous as he continued:

"Te souvient-il de cette amie,
Douce compagne de ma vie?

Dans les bois, en cueillant la fleur Jolie,
Hélène appuyait sur mon cœur. Son cœur.

Oh, qui rendra mon Hélène,
Et la montagne, et le grand chêne?
Leur souvenir fait tous les jours ma peine.
Mon pays sera mes amours. Toujours!"

The latter half of the day wore to a desolate grayness. The Hudson's Bay force was now in Nor'west country, and a strict lookout had to be maintained. Night approached quickly as the sun dipped. Maskwa, keeping closer to the main body, signaled that he had found something. Dunvegan ran up to him hastily.

The Indian stood pointing to the tracks made by a single person on snowshoes. The marks lay diagonally across their line of progress.

"Strong Father, see," Maskwa requested.

"Some trapper," commented the chief

trader. "The shoes are Ojibway pattern."

"Yes," assented Maskwa, quietly. "I made the shoes."

Dunvegan scanned him sharply in the gathering dark.

"You?" he cried, astonished. "How do you know that?"

"By the knots," Maskwa answered, stooping to point out little dents in the snow pattern. "See how they lie in a curve? No one but Maskwa makes them that way!"

"Whose feet?" demanded Dunvegan, with swift suspicion. "Whose feet are in those shoes?"

The fort runner felt the pressed flakes gently before speaking. He arose immediately from the stooping posture.

"The Little Fool's," was his response. "And he has just passed here!"

"Gaspard Follet's tracks!" exclaimed the chief trader incredulously. "Maskwa, are you sure you are not mistaken?"

"I am not mistaken, Strong Father," the Ojibway declared gravely. "In the summer moons I made the shoes for the

Little Fool. Give me leave to follow. I will bring him to you. He is no farther away than the ridge of balsam."

"Go," ordered Dunvegan curtly.

The fort runner launched himself into the gloom of the stunted shrubbery. Bunching where their leader was halted, the Hudson's Bay men waited silently. Presently there sounded the double crunch of two pairs of raquettes on the brittle crust. The branches of the dwarfed evergreens swayed. Maskwa strode out, dragging a diminutive figure by one arm.

"Here, Strong Father, is the Little Fool," he announced without emotion.

At the sight of the Oxford House men Gaspard Follet began to utter a series of joyous squeals.

"Blessed be the Virgin," he cried. "Here is safety. Oh! name of the dead saints, I was lost, lost—lost!"

He sprang to Dunvegan, ingratiating himself, praising, fawning, beseeching. The Ojibway fort runner looked grimly at the antics of his prize.

"The Little Fool is glad to meet with the Company's servants," he observed in ironic fashion. "It gives him great joy."

Dunvegan looked into Maskwa's face, quite surprised at the tone.

"Why not?" he questioned.

"That did not dwell in his mind until I caught him," the Indian declared. "Neither was the Little Fool lost."

"What do you mean, Maskwa?" Dunvegan asked. "My brother, you speak in riddles. Gaspard has evidently wandered from Oxford House and lost his way." To the idiot, he added: "Do you know where you are at all?"

"No, no," moaned Gaspard piteously. "I was lost, I tell you. I do not know this country."

The Ojibway fort runner grunted in derision. "Strong Father," he said, "the Little Fool was not lost as you believe. He has been following the Caribou Ridge all day. And Strong Father will remember that the trail on the Caribou Ridges, though it cannot be traveled with dog teams, short-

ens by half the distance to the fort of the French Hearts where we journey. That is how the Little Fool thought to reach it first!"

The Indian stopped his speech abruptly and took a stride onward as if this circumstance was no concern of his. Dunvegan halted him, crying out:

"Hold there, Maskwa! Do you pretend to suspect Gaspard?"

Maskwa made a gesture of complete unconcern. "I have spoken," he returned placidly.

"Why," fumed Dunvegan, "such a thing in my estimation is incredible—preposterous! The idea of that dwarf, that idiot—— No! It's too ridiculous!"

"I have spoken," repeated Maskwa, in the same even key.

When the chief trader attempted to question him by way of discovering his exact meaning, the Ojibway maintained a stubborn silence which he broke only with a suggestion about the night camp.

"Turn to the ridge of balsam, Strong

Father," he advised. "We shall find it good to rest there."

Dunvegan accepted his trusted runner's hint. He knew that the Indian eye read wilderness signs which no white man living could ever interpret. He understood that the Indian brain gleaned an intelligence from inanimate things which the greatest mind of civilization could never comprehend. Therefore he was content to follow the native wisdom and follow it unseeingly, for at Maskwa's word he had walked blindly to his own ultimate advantage some hundreds of times.

So the Oxford House men diverged from their course on the first track that Gaspard Follet had tramped in the snowy ridge where it crossed Blazing Pine River. The Ojibway went ahead, and, when lost to the view of his fellows among the timber, he paralleled Gaspard's trail at some distance first on one side and then on the other. Soon he found what he sought and tramped on to the balsams, grunting with great satisfaction.

When Dunvegan and his retainers reached the balsam ridge, Maskwa stood there awaiting them. He called the chief trader aside.

"Strong Father," he began in a low voice, "does a lost man throw away his rifle and his food?"

"No! Great heavens, no!" exclaimed Dunvegan. "Why?"

Maskwa put his hand into a green tree and held out two objects.

"Because here is the rifle and the pack-sack of the Little Fool."

The chief trader wheeled with hot accusations for Gaspard Follet, but Maskwa checked them.

"Softly, Strong Father," was his caution. "I have something else to show you first."

"But he is the spy," murmured Dunvegan, trying to keep his voice down in spite of his anger. "I see it all now—curse his blithering impudence! What dolts we have been at Oxford House! And he fooled Malcolm Macleod. Good Lord, what infants, what imbeciles! A fool, a dwarf,

an idiot to get the best of us! Maskwa, I think we need some guidance such as yours."

"The Little One is a dwarf," conceded Maskwa, "but he is not an idiot. Neither is he a fool, though the name comes easily to my tongue. Strong Father, he has the wisdom of the beaver and the heart of the fox. But at last he is trapped!"

"I'll bind him," declared Dunvegan, full of vexation and self-contempt. "I'll tie the rat fast lest he outwit the elephants."

"Wait," begged the Ojibway fort runner. "Come to the top of the ridge of balsam first. Then we can bind the Little Fool."

Maskwa pushed through the trees with a slouching movement. He set his shoes without the slightest noise in the soft, deep undersnows of the evergreens. Dunvegan did likewise, taking care to snap no twig. On the crest which commanded the open valley the Ojibway pushed aside the thick branches hanging screen-like over the edge.

"Strong Father, look!" he directed.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FIRST BLOW

MECHANICALLY Dunvegan counted the dog teams that crossed the valley before his gaze. Five great sleds he made out, sleds piled high with huge bales of furs. Two men accompanied each sledge, a driver and an armed guard. Evidently the train was going into camp under the shoulders of the Caribou Ridges.

"Strong Father did not think that any of the French Hearts were so near?" ventured Maskwa quietly.

"No," the chief trader muttered, "I did not. Ah! they are halting. It is well that they did not get sight of us, Maskwa, for I fancy we could never catch them if those big teams once started galloping."

The Ojibway nodded gravely as he

peered, animal-like, between two large tree trunks.

"That is why I bade Strong Father keep with the ridge," he replied. "On the River of the Blazing Pine the French Hearts would have seen us easily where the valleys meet."

"You knew it was coming?" Dunvegan cried in amazement. "This Niskitowaney train?"

"Even so, Strong Father."

"How?"

"By the actions of the Little Fool."

"What was Gaspard doing?"

The fort runner pointed to a ledge of rock that jutted out on the highest point of the hill.

"The Little Fool stood there, waiting," he observed. "He had seen the fur train of the French Hearts coming and thought to travel with them to their fort. But soon his thoughts were changed. He saw me and disappeared in the trees. When I caught him, he had no food or rifle. Yet I brought them to you, Strong Father.

"He is a little devil as well as a little fool," Maskwa summed up. "He deserves no pity. Mark you, Strong Father, he has been the right hand of that wicked French Heart, the Black Ferguson. Does Strong Father remember the ambush on Caribou Point when we thought to take the leader? Who brought the news? Who led us there? Who had planned the surprise with the French Hearts? None but the Little Fool! Who gave them notice of the movements of our fur trains? The Little Fool! Who warned the Crees to fall upon you as you journeyed to Kamattawa? Why, Strong Father, it is always the Little Fool. And his weak brain seems stronger than the wisdom of the Stern Father and his servants. He has laughed at us all."

"Yes," grumbled Dunvegan, "he has fooled us for a time. But that time is gone."

"While the wolf lives, his teeth may still rend," Maskwa philosophized. "Let the Little Fool die! Else will he work Strong Father greater harm."

The calm suggestion brought an expres-

sion of repugnance to the chief trader's face.

"I can't do that?" he objected.

"It is well," remarked the Ojibway. "I have counseled."

"As a prisoner he cannot do us any harm," Dunvegan persisted.

"I have counseled," Maskwa repeated. "When Strong Father wishes it had been done he will remember my counsel."

He dismissed the subject with habitual unconcern and devoted a few minutes to spying upon the camping preparations of the Nor'west fur train. With the movements of skilled woodsmen they set about it. First of all, they stepped out of their snowshoe loops and diligently used the raquettes as shovels, clearing the snow away and banking it up till a long rectangle of ground lay bare. While some thickly carpeted the cleared space with balsam brush taken from the foot of the ridge others chopped dead pines into firewood and built a long stringer of flame the entire length of the camp ground.

Then the dogs were unharnessed and the

sledges drawn up by thongs into handy trees out of reach of these huskies, who otherwise would destroy the furs while the men slept. After that the Nor'west drivers and guards threw themselves down by the fires to prepare their supper of dried meat and tea, having already stuck the dogs' portion of frozen whitefish upon twigs to thaw by the fierce blaze.

From the height Dunvegan and Maskwa watched it all.

" They know how to make camp, all right," the chief trader observed.

The Ojibway nodded briefly. " They have also traveled many trails," he supplemented judicially.

" And since it is a good camp we will not need to change it," continued Dunvegan significantly.

" It is well," grunted Maskwa. He shook the screening boughs back in place and turned about, adding: " When the dark falls thickly, we will come this way again."

The Oxford House men were growing impatient in the increasing cold, but they

received the news of the Nor'west fur train's proximity with jubilation. The frost was becoming so intense that to do without a fire even for a few hours proved impossible; so the whole force backtrailed a mile as a precaution and huddled over a hastily built pyramid of lighted spruce branches. The Caribou Ridges, looming up, shut off the flames from the Nor'westers' view. Also, Dunvegan posted an Indian lookout on the height above the other bivouac to carry warning of any untoward move. The dogs' jaws were tied with strips of buckskin that they might not growl or bark, for sounds carried far in the frosty air.

Attention was now paid to Gaspard Follet, and he was placed in the custody of two Hudson's Bay men, who had orders to shoot him on his first attempt at escape. He still kept up his pretense of foolish wits, but a sinister threat from Dunvegan silenced his idiotic whining. The chief trader did not condescend to parley with Follet nor tell him of what he was suspected. He simply ordered the dwarf into strict charge. It

was the business of Malcolm Macleod, the Factor, to judge him.

The hour of waiting while the gray twilight thickened to black dark became oppressive. The Oxford House men chafed under the restraint and the silence. Other than murmurings and flame noises no sounds came from around the fire. Terence Burke had soaked himself through and through with the radiating heat. Complacently he pawed his limbs. Now these limbs, reinvigorated, cried out for active work as loudly as his hungry stomach cried for hearty food.

He whispered to Connear: "'Tis a bloomin' wake we're at. Phwat's the use o' dallyin' loike this? Why don't we take these Nor'west divils by the scruffs o' their necks an' shake them? They're outnumbered four to wan!"

"Mind your own business," growled Connear. "You keep mixin' yourself up with every plan that's being made. You're too fresh! Keep your own place, you Irish lubber, and don't try runnin' the whole show!"

Baptiste Verenne flashed his customary grin, with the attribute of ivory teeth.

"*Oui,*" he commented, "kip de place an' go ver' cautious. Dat's de way in dis countree. You see, we mus' spring on dose mans *vite* w'en dey not t'ink! Geeve dem no taim harness de fas' dogs. Dat's onlee way we get dem."

"It's a slow sphring," Terence complained. "If the recoil's as slow as the sphring, bewitch me if divil a thing comes av it."

"Shut up," commanded Connear tersely. "Your mouth's as big as the Irish sea."

"Yes," snapped Burke, "an' it's swallowed better sailors than yerself."

Baptiste made an angry gesture for quiet and motioned furtively to where Dunvegan stood silently warming himself on the other side of the fire.

"*Saprie!* You be stubborn mans!" he snarled contemptuously.

But now the order came to move. Several Indians were left with the sledges and the newly-made prisoner. The rest of the

men filed off in the direction of the balsam ridge. Its crest was reached silently and in perfect order. There the men paused at a point directly over the camp they purposed to rush.

Maskwa, with Dunvegan, surveyed the slope, contemplating the moment of descent. Far below they could see the line of crackling fire with the banked snow at the sides glowing pink beneath the blaze. Etched out dully against each fitful flame, the squatting figures crouched low. At times a hand was cleanly outlined in the white upper light as it raised food to mouth. A tea pail passing down the line of men flashed intermittently.

"Now while they eat is the time, Strong Father," the Ojibway fort runner murmured. "They think only of their stomachs, and their arms are not handy. If we are swift and sure on our feet not a shot need be fired."

"Very well," assented Dunvegan. "You lead. I will stay on your heels."

"Let the men make no sound," warned

Maskwa. "We go without noise as close as possible. As soon as their dogs scent us we must spring like the hungry panther."

The chief trader passed a whispered caution to his retainers.

"Keep close to us," he adjured, "and rush when we rush! Grasp the fellows and prevent them from shooting! There is no need for bloodshed, and we cannot afford to lose any of our number. Every man we have will be needed at Fort Brondel!"

There was a faint, dissatisfied murmur at this command. Fresh in the minds of the Hudson's Bay men were the accounts given by survivors of the bloody sacking of the Wokattiwagan and Shamattawa fur trains. They would have liked a sanguinary reprisal, but they knew better than to disobey any order of Dunvegan's. So they relinquished their vengeful anticipations and followed watchfully.

Down the snowy hillside they dropped, noiseless as shadows. No figure at the fire stirred from its eating; no dog voiced alarm. The balsams were left behind and

the men entered scrubby spruces, where they found better cover.

The camp was no more than a little dome of light walled in by impenetrable darkness. The night crowded to its red ramparts, full of mystery, unreadable, sinister, fear-compelling. And, crowding like the night, came the Oxford House force, with all the advantage of position that the inky darkness gave.

Slowly, their nerves growing more tense at every step, they worked through the spruces. Each yard they advanced increased the strain. A little drumming noise began to vibrate in the men's throats. An almost inaudible sound it was, but to their own strained hearing it rose in a roar. Closer and closer they stole till, seeing their enemies so plainly, the idea that they themselves must be seen impressed itself with ever-increasing power.

Maskwa treaded the evergreen aisles like a swift wraith. Holding the ends of each other's sashes, the rest walked in single file after him. So great was the curb on their feelings, so suffocating the silence, that some

would have gained immense relief by uttering tremendous shouts. But they dared not! The first outcry must come from the camp. The alarm would ring out unexpectedly, and the invaders waited for that moment and wrestled with their tingling senses.

Forty paces!—the impaled whitefish before the fires looked ludicrously large, like young sharks. Thirty paces!—the ruddy blaze limned the dark, lean-featured countenances of the Nor'westers, resting in natural unconsciousness of impending disaster. Twenty-five!—the nervous tension snapped with a sudden mental jerk that set every sinew in the men's bodies tingling!

The suspicious huskies blew loudly and growled. Instinctively the Nor'west guards reached quickly for their guns, only to be seized by the shoulders and hurled back into the snow. The camp turned instantly to a mass of rolling, grappling bodies. Red coals kicked into the banks sent forth hissing steam clouds. Feet stamped and plunged and twisted here and there, throwing up white spurts of snow, knocking burn-

ing branches through the air, tripping opponents with savage force.

The struggle took place practically in silence except for the uneasy snarling of the dogs and the heavy breathing and occasional oaths of the men. Often a knife blade gleamed redly as it poised for a blow. The thud of steel on flesh and the groan of pain followed.

Then, bringing the climax of brute savagery, the growling huskies charged, indifferent whether their chisel-like fangs sliced master or master's foe. But they had waited too long! The moment when their assault might have seriously hindered the Hudson's Bay men—in the initial minute of the fight—was past. A half dozen of Dunvegan's followers sprang out of the mêlée, and, catching up dog whips, flayed neutrality through their tough hides.

The cowing of the Nor'westers' huskies was coincident with the overpowering of the Nor'westers themselves. Held in the grip of two, and often three, antagonists each of the guards and the Indian drivers was sub-

dued, bound, and laid beside the raked-up fire.

In a sullen line they lay, beaten but full of stubborn enmity. To that line Dunvegan added Gaspard Follet when the Company's sledges came on. The capture of the Niskitowaney fur train was complete.

CHAPTER XVII

THE HEART OF THE SAVAGE

IMMEDIATELY the Oxford House men re-established the camp to suit their own requirements. Then they devoted themselves to a long-delayed supper till their ravenous appetites were fully appeased. The dogs of the Nor'westers had been fed to keep them quiet. The turn of the newly arrived teams came when the masters were satisfied. Baptiste Verenne and the drivers arose, taking the allotted portion of thawed whitefish. They took their dog whips also.

"*Ici, giddés,*" Baptiste called.

The animals leaped forward on the instant, growling and slavering for the whitefish. One meal in twenty-four hours was not in any wise sufficient for their savage stomachs, and now it was three hours past

the end of that customary space of fasting. A sound kicking met their energetic advance, and they were scattered out that they might be more easily fed. Then the Nor'westers' dogs jumped in, making a tangle of furry backs, bushy tails, and snapping jaws.

On these intruders the heavy whips smote viciously. They retreated, thoroughly cowed, and with sharp commands, kicks, and blows the food was at length distributed. The more cunning beasts bolted their two whitefish in a flash and fought with slower comrades for their remaining portion. Slowly the tumult died down and the dogs crept up close to the lower end of the fire, where brush beds had been thrown for them.

Having indulged in a brief after-supper smoke, the Hudson's Bay men began to prepare for immediate slumber. They removed their outer parkas with the capotes and hung them on sticks to dry before the fire, together with gauntlets, leggings, and traveling shoepacks.

They put on great, fur-lined sleeping

moccasins and rolled themselves in thick fur robes designed for preserving the body warmth during slumber. Against the abnormal frost it was imperative to cover their heads with the upper folds of these sleeping garments, as any part of the face left exposed would be frozen in a solid mask by morning. Weary with the long day's trail, the men lay motionless beside the banked-up fires.

Only two, Dunvegan and Maskwa, remained sitting upright, talking together in low tones over their plans, the crucial point of which was not far away.

"At three in the morning we break camp," the chief trader announced. "By nightfall we must be within sight of Brondel. I think with a few hours' rest that we might take them by surprise in the very early dawn."

The Ojibway fort runner smoked slowly, pondering. He offered no word. Squatting squarely on his haunches, he stared at the fire with a sort of somnolent vacancy on his countenance. Yet the Indian brain was

active! Beneath their glassy surface lights his eyes studied future events. When he saw things as clearly as his shrewd discernment demanded he would speak, and not before!

"You understand, my brother," continued Dunvegan, "that it is necessary for me to succeed in my enterprise. The seizure of this fort of the French Hearts is so necessary to the Factor's whole plan that we cannot think of failure. If I accomplish the capture he will join me after he has taken Fort Dumarge. Then, together, we purpose to besiege the third, last, and strongest of the Nor'west posts in our district."

Maskwa grunted noncommittally and for an instant took the pipe from his lips.

"Fort La Roche of the French Hearts is powerful," he commented briefly.

"So powerful," supplemented Dunvegan, "that it will test even our combined forces to rush its stockades. Otherwise it is impregnable. Fort Dumarge must go, Maskwa; also Fort Brondel! The enemy's opposition must be wiped out as we proceed.

Having no harassing foes at our backs, we will at the last stand an equal chance against the defenders of Fort La Roche."

"So," remarked the Ojibway. "It is a good plan, Strong Father. And should we stand inside La Roche we may see some old friends."

"That may be." The unconquered bitterness surged up in Dunvegan.

"No doubt we shall see the Wayward One, the daughter of Stern Father."

"Yes, doubtless."

"Also Soft Eyes, the traitor, who came from over the Big Waters."

"Aye, indeed," murmured Dunvegan, "and the Factor proposes to deal with him. It will be dark dealing, I fancy, for Edwin Glyndon."

"We shall meet, too," Maskwa went on oratorically, "the wise Chief Running Wolf and his hasty son, Three Feathers."

"In the fight we may meet them, for we know Running Wolf has added his tribe's strength to that of Black Ferguson in defense of Fort La Roche."

"There at the last will we stalk the Black

Ferguson in his lair," rejoiced the Ojibway. "It will be a good stalk, Strong Father. The old wolf is worthy of a hard chase. And, Strong Father, there is one other we shall see!"

"Whom?"

"The Fair One! The niece of old Pierre —her that Soft Eyes took to wife!"

Dunvegan winced, finding no words. Maskwa voiced something that had evolved in his facile mind.

"Strong Father is my brother," he declared, "and I have read my brother's thoughts. It was his wish to place the Fair One at his own fireside. That is still his desire, although he does not fulfill it. If Strong Father were an Indian, it would swiftly be done. Yet the Indian's ways are not the ways of the white man. He must not steal his brother's wife till that brother dies. Is it not so, Strong Father?"

"Even so, Maskwa," sighed Dunvegan, burdened by his grim thoughts.

"Then Strong Father shall have the Fair One to wife. I, Maskwa, will see when it

comes to the last that Soft Eyes falls in the attack."

"No!" cried Dunvegan vehemently, "a thousand times, no! Not a prick of the skin will you give Edwin Glyndon. I warn you once. Let that stay your hand!"

The Ojibway grumbled at the adjuration of restraint, for although he did not quite comprehend its moral motive he fully understood its decisiveness.

"Be it so," he observed. "What I say is wisdom. I have also other wisdom for Strong Father."

"How?"

"I would have him enter the gates of Fort Brondel by cunning."

"Explain, Maskwa," commanded the chief trader quietly.

"In the night of to-morrow let ten men drive this Niskitowaney fur train inside the stockades, the rest of the Company's servants lying in wait outside. When the gates are won, the rest is easy, Strong Father."

The chief trader turned to Maskwa with an exclamation of amazement.

"By Rupert's bones, but you are bold," he cried admiringly.

"The move of the bold often wins," remarked Maskwa.

Dunvegan revolved the project mentally, getting each separate point of view.

"We'll do it," he rapped out, smashing a burnt stick-end into the coals with a force that sent fresh flames roaring up. "Maskwa, we'll do it!"

"Good!" exclaimed the Ojibway, without elation. "But first we need the password of the gates. If Strong Father allows, I will get it." He motioned to the prone, blanket-wrapped prisoners alongside the fire.

"Get it," ordered the chief trader. "But no torture, remember!"

"So," promised Maskwa coolly. "I will frighten it from one of them."

He plucked the Worcester pistol out of Dunvegan's belt and went slowly up the line. Presently he singled out the spokesman of the captives lying completely muffled up in the sleeping robes. At the touch

of Maskwa's toe the Nor'wester sat erect, his black-bearded, swarthy face full of evil glints. He was one of the scum that the younger fur company had picked up to swell their none too formidable ranks.

The Ojibway squatted opposite this fellow, in whose charge the Niskitowaney fur train had been traveling.

"The password at your fort," he commanded with abruptness and vigor.

A villainous oath was the response, an epithet that would have been a vicious blow had the Nor'wester's arms been loose.

"The password!" Maskwa's voice kept even, but he stabbed the black man through with the needle points of his concentrated gaze.

No response! The Ojibway brought the pistol into view and leveled it with a precision more deadly than visual concentration.

"The password!" he repeated stonily for the third time.

"Shoot and be damned to you!" cried the Nor'wester, the swagger and braggadocio which in his breed is a substitute for cour-

age breaking out. Swift as light came Maskwa's side-twist of the hand.

Bang! The pistol's scorch stung the Nor'wester's right ear.

Bang! Its red muzzle jet seared his left ear.

Bang! The round, fiendish mouth spat a white furrow through his black hair.

The awakened camp, thinking of an attack, sat up and grasped weapons, then put them furtively back, half ashamed of their mistake, and gazed wonderingly at the strange tableau.

"French Heart, the next one goes through your head," warned the Ojibway. "The password!"

The Nor'wester, staring into the deadly cylinder of steel, experienced a prickly, spreading sensation in the nerves of the forehead just between his eyes. He imagined the crashing impact of the leaden missile. He already felt the oozy bullet-hole.

Maskwa's eyes lanced him with bloody light which the coals infused. His spirit quivered under that knife. His nerves col-

lapsed. He pitched forward on his face, reiterating the password in choking gasps.

"Marseillaise," he panted. "Marseillaise!"

The Ojibway tossed the man's sleeping robes over his fear-shaken visage. Abruptly he stalked back and dropped the pistol in Dunvegan's lap.

"You have heard, Strong Father?" he asked. "It is good! He spoke the truth, because he dared not lie. In the night of to-morrow we will enter the gates of the fort of the French Hearts with that password. I have spoken!"

Like a snake Maskwa slid into his fur blankets. Dunvegan followed, and the whole camp was soon still.

Gradually the banked logs of the fire broke in little falling rifts of coals. Uncombated, the frost advanced and screend the red glow with a gray hand. Across the valley of the Blazing Pine came the howling of wolves. Then of a sudden the winter aurora leaped out of the north, sweeping majestically from stars to earth-line. No

rustling sound such as is heard within the Arctic Circle accompanied its movement. It came and vanished in mystic silence, only to reappear with twofold brilliance and multitudinous variations of hue. Up in the zenith a corona of dazzling splendor formed, and the miracle, continuing, left pulsating, nebulous rays walking the far-off, frozen shores.

The immensity of the wilderness reaches gave field for unlimited display. Flooded with resplendent light, the primal wastes of snow reflected every colored bar, every glorious cloud, every celestial flash. As a monstrous mirror to augment the radiance and multiply the lambent gleams, the speckless crust stretched on and on. The very earth seemed to acquire motion and to roll its snows in red and white undulating waves.

Wrapped in the sleep of utter weariness, lost to the hard facts of life, the sleepers lay in a realm of mysticism, of phantasmagoria. Thus all night across the world blazed this carnival of flame.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

"*ARRETEZ!*" The sentinel's challenge from the gates of Fort Brondel rang out sharply in the near-dawn. Through the blinding smother of great, soft-falling snowflakes he had heard rather than seen the advance of a dog train toiling up the rising ground upon which the post was situated. It came, he thought, as a Nor'west train would come, making no unnecessary clamor, but without any precautions for secrecy. The storm-laden air choked the first cry of the watchman, preventing it from reaching the clogged ears of the approaching party. Again his hail was lifted up.

"*Holá! Arrêtez!*" he commanded, the strident tone cutting the snow.

Instantly the leading team pulled up.

The others lined behind it. Brondel's sentinel could discern five bulky sledges, each accompanied by a driver and a guard with rifle on shoulder. Their faces and garments plastered thickly by moist flakes, the men looked like tall, white stumps suddenly moved out of the forest and set before the stockades. Identities were impossibly vague in the storm and in the gray dark which preceded the morning.

"*Qui vive?*" asked the keeper of the post gate doubtfully.

"The Niskitowaney fur train," answered the muffled voice of one of the halfbreeds who drove.

"The password?"

"Marseillaise!"

The gate bars rattled with release; a gap yawned in the stockade.

"*Entrez,*" came the permission.

Walking with the leading sledge, Maskwa whirled as he passed the sentinel and felled him with a quick blow of the rifle butt. Quickly he removed the unconscious man's weapons and threw him on the sled.

Strong Father, the thing is easy, as I told you," the Ojibway muttered to the first snow-coated giant guard, who was in reality Bruce Dunvegan.

"Too easy," was Bruce's answer. "Listen! There is no stir about the buildings, no sound. That puzzles me, Maskwa."

"Men sleep soundest just before the light breaks," explained the fort runner in a tone of satisfaction.

"Perhaps." Dunvegan's tone was doubtful.

As they stood in the palisade entrance, listening keenly for any cry which would mean their discovery, the pulses of the Hudson's Bay men surged faster and faster. The cold chill of the storm-beaten atmosphere changed suddenly to an electric glow. The fever of waiting strain flushed their bodies. They began to breathe hard and shift weapons from left hands to armpits and back again.

But no clamor beat out of the post structures; a ghostly blur they lay, walled round with gigantic drifts. The only vibration

which communicated itself to the ear was the velvet brushing of falling snow against the high stockades.

Faces turned in the direction whence they had come, the ten figures with the dog teams remained poised in perfect silence, anxious, eager, expectant. Then, quite near, the wilderness voice they awaited spoke out abruptly.

"Yir-r-r-ee-ee!" echoed the weird, panicky screech of a lynx.

Maskwa curved his hands about his mouth and replied with the horned owl's full-throated whoop.

"Kee-yoo-oo-oo-oo!" he quavered in a quick, ever-diminishing tremolo.

At the pre-arranged signal the rest of the Oxford House force moved swiftly up and passed through Brondel's guardless gate. Two Indians had been left with the bound prisoners and the Nor'west sledge teams in the fringe of the timber.

"Are you ready, men?" Dunvegan asked.

"Aye, aye, sir," cried Connear quaintly.

" This is what we have all been waiting for."

To the chief trader it was an incredible thing that they reached the buildings in the center of the yard without any alarm being raised. The *giddés* whined. Instantly a howling response arose from the quarters where the fort dogs were kept. Gripping their arms tightly, the invaders waited for the uproar that should follow the huskies' wailing and for the man-to-man struggle which must succeed the awakening of the post.

No uproar came! The expected onslaught failed to materialize!

Even Maskwa became mystified. " Strong Father," he whispered, " this is beyond my wisdom."

" And mine," admitted Dunvegan, worried as well as puzzled by the utter lack of the expected developments.

" Can the post be deserted? Have they had warning and fled? "

" No! In case of warning the stockades would have been lined with fighters. There is something extraordinarily wrong about

the place. A sentinel isn't set in a deserted fort, you know. And yet, why is there no sign of life? Maskwa, it's uncanny!"

Although totally unfamiliar with the ground and the plan of Fort Brondel, Dunvegan decided to investigate without delay. He pressed open the door of the dark building in front of him, the latch offering no resistance.

"Come," he ordered. "If any man is clumsy enough to make a noise let him stay outside!"

Within the silent room, Dunvegan drew a candle-end and a match from his inner pocket and struck a light. The faint beams showed that he was in the store of the Northwest Fur Company's post. Shelves held neat arrays of goods; orderly piles of bales and boxes were ranged about the walls; but no person could be seen.

As many men as the store was capable of accommodating crowded after Dunvegan. In their shoepacks they walked soft-footed as panthers.

"These French Hearts must sleep as the dead," murmured Maskwa.

" Yes, or else they hide somewhere to pistol the half of us at a stroke," the chief trader returned.

He lighted a fresh candle taken from a shelf. Its larger glimmer projected giant shadows of the men upon the farther end of the store. The huge silhouettes loomed up with a mysterious vagueness suggestive of the advent of the real human figures. Dunvegan's followers passed their own surmises to each other in low, husky whispers, remarking on such a chance as their leader had recognized.

" If they are hiding in order to get to close quarters," observed Connear, " they'll be sorry in the end. For we can hit in a clinch as well as they can. Eh, Terence Burke? "

" Yes, me enemy," muttered the vigorous-minded Irishman, whom no strange situation could abash, " an' if it's thim same Donnybrook Fair tricks they're after, they'll find me rifle butt makes a mighty foine blackthorn."

Baptiste Verenne spoke to Black Fox, the Salteaux Indian, in a soft aside.

"Black Fox, you be son of beeg medicine-mans," he whispered. "Mebbe you be tell us w'at dis mean. Spik de wise word an' say w'y de Nor'westaires don' joomp out for keel us queeck."

But the Salteaux shook his head.

"The French Hearts are fools and snakes," he replied. "Their ways are dark as the ways of evil spirits. Therefore they cannot be read."

"Dat mooch I be know, me," confided Baptiste.

Numerous whispers were making a very audible rustle. Bruce Dunvegan held up his hand for silence. He began to examine what lay beyond the other two of the three doors in the store.

Throwing open the one on the right, his candle gleam flashed across a large, empty floor. According to the custom of new forts built purely for aggressive purposes, Dunvegan judged that store, blockhouse, and trading-room adjoined or were connected by passages. This section, he presumed, was the blockhouse.

A hasty survey proved his conclusion correct. The light played around the rough walls, revealing weapons, trophies of the chase and the various equipments used in wilderness life throughout the different seasons. But, like the store, the blockhouse was without occupants of any kind.

Dunvegan made a quick decision and gave a quicker order.

"Bring lights," was his command. "Let half your number hold the blockhouse and half occupy the store. It will take an army of Nor'westers to oust us now."

Immediately the chief trader's directions were carried out. The men assigned themselves promptly in equal bodies to both buildings.

There remained the trading-room and the factor's quarters to search. Dunvegan concluded that there was no separate house for the factor of the post, because a stairway led up through the store ceiling. He surmised that the residential apartments of the one in command of Brondel lay above. Gently he opened the door in the left-hand

wall of the store and saw a long, gloomy passageway.

"No light," Bruce commented. "Nothing there either, it seems!"

He closed the door again and set foot on the stairs.

"Guard those entrances well," was his adjuration. "Don't stir unless you get a signal from me. I'm going up to awaken the lord of Fort Brondel, whoever he may be, and let him know that he is a prisoner of the Hudson's Bay Company."

Slowly Dunvegan ascended the stairway and reached the upper floor. He still had the candle in his hand, its pale flame revealing a sort of living-room which held a table, a stove, chairs, shelves of books, a lounge covered with fur robes, a large wooden cupboard, a pair of leather-padded stools, a writing-desk in the corner. The furnishings were plain, though comfortable; they seemed such as any hard-working factor might possess.

Treading softly, the chief trader crossed to the door at the other end and pushed on

it. It remained fast, bolted inside. He put his ear to the wood. No sound!

Dunvegan stepped back a stride. Rising with a swift movement on the toes of the left foot, he planted his right sole flatly against the door with a straight, powerful body jolt. There came the crunching noise of metal tearing through hard wood, and the barrier swung back trembling on its hinges.

Instantly the wind of suction puffed out the candle. Bruce growled and smothered a low imprecation. Stepping cautiously to the side of the jamb beyond the range of any sudden missile which might be sent through the open doorway, he fumbled in his pockets for a match. He scratched it hurriedly against the wall, his eyes searching the gloom for a sign of the sleeper whom he must have awakened. He dabbed the match to the wick, and gazed more eagerly. But no figure launched from the blackness beyond the threshold; there arose not even a rustle to show that someone's slumber had been broken. To the listening Dunvegan

there was something weird in this circumstance. He wondered if he should find the sleeping chamber as he had found the store and the blockhouse—empty!

His pondering, like his hesitation, occupied only a second. The air of uncertainty left a tinge of suspense which Bruce hastened to dispel. Feeling some subtle magnetism, some unaccountable sensation of a familiar presence, some tremendous unknown climax which his heart acknowledged blindly, he strode abruptly into the dark apartment, his one hand holding the light well to the side, the other clasping the weapon in his belt.

"Another step, you beast, and husband or no husband, I'll kill you!"

Bitter as acid was the woman's voice which hurled the threat. Across the flickering candle rays Dunvegan's startled glance met a leveled pistol and beyond that the beautiful, defiant eyes of Desirée Lazard.

The unintelligible cry rising within the man choked in his dry throat. He gasped and trembled, causing the white light to

play over bedstead, coverlet, and the loose-frocked figure crouching behind. His physical courage and indomitable will, sufficient to face the fierce Nor'westers within the very walls of their stronghold, was displaced by a nerveless weakness that banished self-control.

"One more step," she warned, marking his restless muscular twitching. "I mean it. As God hears me, I mean it!"

Dunvegan's mind was battling chaotically with amazement at Desirée's presence, with wonder at her attitude, with a thousand conflicting emotions, each inspired by some swift-passing thought. Joy, doubt, jealousy, malice, love, judgment, forgiveness—these all mingled, held momentary sway, separated one by one and disappeared. Out of this chaos of human feeling Bruce retained no reigning passion. Wisely he let the hot mixture of mad ideas spend itself and give way to his usual cool reserve. Therein rested his salvation.

He still held the candle to one side, and his face was not clear. Even his figure remained shadowy in the sputtering

gleam. That, he knew, accounted for Desirée's mistaking him for her husband.

Now deliberately and with a steady hand he moved his light to the front so that its glimmer yellowed his wind-tanned face.

"Bruce!" Her voice was pitched in the unnatural, hysterical scream of a person struggling with a nightmare.

The sense of the dramatic leaped through the blood of both. Dunvegan glowed with the hectic pulse of old desire, but his cold reserve was maintained by a nerve-wrenching effort.

"You do not dream," he ventured in a measured tone. "I am a strict reality, though an intruding one."

At the sound of his voice Desirée dropped her loaded pistol on the bed. Her tense body shivered, as if at escape from menace or danger. She covered her face with her hands. The full bosom worked in a paroxysm of sobs.

"My God! My God!" she moaned, her words coming like a prayer.

Dunvegan set the candle on a nearby stool

and leaned back with folded arms against the door jamb. Thus could he the better control himself, for Desirée's weeping tore his fibres. Irrelevantly he noted that she was not prepared for slumber, but wore a flowing, open-throated day dress. This fact added to Bruce's mystification.

Presently Desirée glanced up, an expression of fear succeeding the despair in her face. She rushed swiftly across the chamber to Dunvegan, her hands extended appealingly.

"Go," she pleaded. "Go before someone hears you! How you learned—how you got here is nothing. Only go! Do you know what danger you stand in?"

"No," Bruce answered grimly. "I am not aware of any."

Her beauty even in tears burned its image in his tortured soul. To clasp her tight would have given both physical and mental relief, but his fingers clenched hard on his flexed biceps; he did not unfold his arms.

"Are you mad?" she cried earnestly, tempestuously. "You enter a Nor'west

fort! You force in the door of the factor's apartment! And why? How did you find out I was here—and alone?"

"I didn't find out. Till two minutes ago I thought you were in Fort La Roche."

"La Roche!" she echoed with astonishment. "Why there?"

"According to Black Ferguson's plan as I read it."

Desirée looked searchingly at the chief trader for a half-minute.

"What do you know?" was her suspicious question, barbed with a slight resentment of his curt words.

"I know, first, that Black Ferguson was informed by Gaspard Follet of your favoring Glyndon; second, that the clerk was approached through Follet, and bribed to join the Nor'west ranks with his wife; third, that the foregoing was but a design of Black Ferguson's to get you beyond the stockades of Oxford House and in a place where he could lay hands on you."

"But he can't," protested Desirée. "I am—you see, I was married."

"Can't!" Dunvegan exploded. The tone of the one word was eloquent conviction. He added darkly: "It is well that I have come in time."

"Ah! no," she cried, the fear for his safety, momentarily forgotten, returning. "You must leave instantly. I will lead you down in silence. Come!"

Her hand was throbbing on his arm, her hot breath beating up against his cheeks. Bruce freed himself, fighting to keep his feelings in check.

"There is no need," he returned. "I shall not stir from here."

She scanned his face. No madness was visible in it. Bruce laughed.

"I am quite sane," he answered her.

"You are in Fort Brondel," Desirée announced severely. "A Nor'west fort——"

"Your pardon," Dunvegan interrupted. "A Hudson's Bay fort!"

"Now you are surely mad."

A slight timidity touched her. She drew back.

"Mad enough to have taken this post! I

command forty-odd men in the rooms below."

Incredulity widened Desirée's eyes, but the chief trader's manner was convincing. She murmured a little in astonishment.

"We—of the post?" she stammered.

"Taken, too! The men become my prisoners—when I find them. You also are a captive!"

"Thank God!" Desirée cried, flushing to the temples. "Thank God!"

It was Bruce's turn for bewilderment. The ecstatic fervor of the woman's voice astounded him.

"What talk!" he exclaimed. "Prisoners don't generally rejoice. Yet this post seems the place of riddles to-night. Oddest of all to me is the fact that I have met with no opposition—except from yourself!"

He smiled, bowing courteously. Desirée smiled too, wanly and without the least approach to mirth.

"Come," she suggested. "I will show you why."

Taking the candle, she led the way across

the living room, down the stairs, and through the great store which belonged to the Northwest Fur Company. Under the wondering gaze of the men they passed and entered the passage into which Bruce Dunvegan had glanced before. This passageway extended for many paces. A closed door stopped their progress at the farther end. Desirée laid her finger tips against it.

"The garrison of Fort Brondel is in there," she murmured.

"The trading room?"

"Yes."

"I had better call my fighters. And you? Wouldn't it be well for you to go back? There may be violence, and——"

"No necessity whatever," Desirée interrupted cynically. "They will not strike a blow. I can vouch for that."

An instant she paused, as if summoning her will power to do a hateful thing. Then she swung the door sharply back and held her light inside.

"Look!" she commanded with bitter irony.

Dunvegan looked. The scene in the huge interior of the trading room struck him with disgust as well as surprise. Around the long, rough table over a score of men and halfbreed women lay in drunken stupor. A liquor barrel crowned the board. At the table's end one man's debauched face lay on the breast of his halfbreed Bacchante of the revel. Bruce recognized the features of Glyndon, enpurpled and drink-puffed. The rest of the revelers had fallen into every imaginable attitude expressive of uncontrolled muscle and befuddled mind.

The stench of spirits was overpowering. Dunvegan drew Desirée back.

" This is sickening," he cried.

She gazed at Bruce with an intensity that went to the heart of him. The look awakened glad, magnetic throbs, yet left uneasy forebodings for the future because her eyes prophesied things which could never be.

" Now you know," she replied, pointing at the table. " I have shown you why."

And in her words Dunvegan read the answer to more than one riddle.

Someone moved behind them ostentatiously in order to attract attention. Bruce turned quickly. The tall Ojibway fort runner stood there.

"What is it, Maskwa?"

"Two messengers clamoring at the gates, Strong Father. What is your will?"

"I will go with you, my brother," the chief trader decided. "It is well to see who they are, myself." He walked with Desirée back into the store.

"Bind the drunken Nor'westers in the trading room," he ordered the men. "Come, Maskwa," he added to the Ojibway.

The fort runner stalked at his back through the snowy yard. Desirée stood and watched them from the door, while away in the east the light of dawn grew little by little.

CHAPTER XIX

NOT IN THE BONDS OF GOD

"WHO speaks!" called Dunvegan from the watchtower to the noisy fellows who were shouting and beating upon the gates with the ostensible object of awakening the sleepy post.

"Messengers from Fort La Roche," they screeched.

"La Roche? Ah! With what news?"

"A message for Brondel's factor."

"Well?"

"Ferguson, our leader, orders his transfer to Fort La Roche. He is to occupy the same position there."

The chief trader roared outright with laughter.

"It seems that I arrived none too soon," he commented ironically, half to himself and half to Maskwa, standing silent by his shoulder.

"Sir?" the couriers interrogated. But Bruce failing to answer, studied some sudden idea grimly and at length.

"Strong Father," interrupted the Ojibway softly, "bid me open the gates, let these French Hearts enter, and thus make them prisoners."

Dunvegan shook his head. "No," he returned. "They shall go back to La Roche. The shock Ferguson receives will be well worth the warning."

To the Nor'west messengers he cried whimsically: "The password?"

"Marseillaise," they answered without hesitation.

Again the chief trader chuckled, drawing something of humor from the situation.

"An hour ago that countersign would have let you in," he observed. "Now it is of no use whatever for the post is in possession of the Hudson's Bay Company."

He paused, looking into the up-turned, surprised faces of the couriers quite visible in the strengthening daylight.

"Go back to Black Ferguson," Dunvegan

directed. " Tell him that you delivered the message he sent to the lord of Fort Brondel, but explain that the lord of Fort Brondel is Bruce Dunvegan. Explain also that the men of the fort lie in babiche bonds; that Glyndon is a prisoner; that Glyndon's wife is a captive. Announce to your leader the leaguer of Fort Dumarge. By the time he hears the news, it, too, will have fallen. And advise him in conclusion that the Hudson's Bay forces from these two posts will shortly combine before La Roche's stockades."

The Nor'west messengers fell away from the gates, astonishment mastering their speech.

" Never fear," Dunvegan reassured them. " If I wished to take you prisoners it would have been done long ago. Now go back as I bade you. And one more message for Black Ferguson! Tell him he did a foolish thing in bribing a drunkard to join his ranks that he might steal the drunkard's wife. Tell him that, and tell him Bruce Dunvegan said it."

Swiftly the couriers retraced the track

they had furrowed in the deep-snowed slope. Their movements were furtive, and in spite of Bruce's assurance of safety, they cast many backward glances.

As the chief trader and the Ojibway quitted the watchtower, Maskwa spoke in a voice of protestation.

"Was that a wise doing, Strong Father?" he asked.

"How, my brother?"

"To send your enemy warning?"

Dunvegan smiled. "I could not forbear the thrust," he declared. "I could not help but let him know that his well-made plans had miscarried; that the woman he thought to seize was again under the protection of the mighty Company."

Maskwa ruminated.

"Then Strong Father has unknowingly accomplished what the French Heart would have done," he mused aloud. "It is well. It is even better than having Soft Eyes, the husband, fall in the fight."

"Ah! you mistake my meaning, Maskwa," observed the chief trader hastily.

" The woman is in my protection, not in my possession."

" So!" the fort runner exclaimed with a slight inflection of surprise. " The French Heart may steal, but Strong Father steals not. How is that?"

" We are different men," answered Bruce, as they entered the store.

Desirée still waited beside the door. Maskwa passed her by without a look, making his way toward the trading room. Had she had the beauty of all the angels, her fairness would have commanded no homage from his cunning, leathery heart.

But Dunvegan, more susceptible, stopped at her word, his hungry eyes dwelling on her beauty, which even after the wearing night appeared faultless.

" Who were those messengers at the gates?" she inquired.

" Men of Black Ferguson's with a drafting order for Brondel's factor."

" Ah!" she gasped, " to—to——"

" To La Roche," Bruce supplied. " You see I was right. I came just in time."

With an impulsive, winning gesture Desirée put her hands in Dunvegan's.

"I ought to be thankful," she began brokenly. "And I am! Heaven knows I am! But I should also be frank. After greeting you as I did in my room I must explain."

"Not unless you wish, unless——"

"It is my wish, my will," she interrupted. "I need relief; I must give someone my confidence. Otherwise I shall go mad!"

"There is another who should receive your confidence."

"You think so?" she cried bitterly. "Even if he could comprehend no single word of it? If he were sunk in debauchery from the very day of our marriage? From the moment of flight?"

"What!" exclaimed the thunderstruck chief trader. "What's that you say?"

Desirée tottered. "Let me sit down on this bench," she begged. "I'm weak somehow and—and faint."

Dunvegan leaned back against the store counter.

God," he breathed—" no wonder!"

The woman looked up beneath the hand which soothed her hammering temples.

"You love Glyndon," Bruce burst out unguardedly.

Her fist descended viciously on the bench where she sat.

"No! My God, who could—now?" Vehemence, abhorrence, disgust, filled her voice.

"You did," he persisted, rather cruelly and with an ultra-selfish motive.

"Infatuation," Desirée cried, "for the clean mask that he wore. But love?—Ah! no, can one love a sot, a beast?"

"Tell me," Dunvegan urged.

She caught her breath a few times helplessly in the stress of emotion, her eyes roving round the big store which held none but themselves. Her gaze stopped on Bruce's face. Her sentences came from her lips mechanically.

"I think his beauty and his old-world manners dazzled me," was her frank, pride-dissolving confession. "For the time I—I

forgot you, Bruce. I imagined I cared more for the other. My indecision could not brook his mad wooing. For remember that change, absence, and pressure are the three things which convert any woman's will."

Desirée paused, a pleading for pity in her glance.

" I took refuge behind my vow," she continued after a second. " But that gave me no stability. If I would marry him, he promised to leave Oxford House immediately and join the Nor'westers. You see Ferguson had already approached him through Gaspard Follet."

" That," Dunvegan observed, " should have shown you his true character."

" I was blind," she lamented. " I deemed it sacrifice. In a way it was, I suppose. How could I know that the plan arranged by Ferguson through Gaspard Follet was the very thing that suited his evil intentions? He offered Edwin command of Brondel. I thought it safe enough to be the factor's wife in a post removed from Fort La Roche."

Bruce made a disdainful gesture. " Those messengers showed you how safe it was," he remarked acridly.

" Father Brochet married us," Desirée went on stonily. " It was in the evening. At once we fled from Oxford House, the sentry thinking we were only taking a turn on the lake with the dogs. But in the forest a Nor'west guide from Brondel met us with another sledge as agreed, and the flight began in earnest. The Nor'wester had rum with him. I rode on one sledge. The thing I had married rode on the other, gulping down the rum. You can imagine what happened! "

" Ah! " breathed Dunvegan pityingly.

" When we made camp near dawn he was drunk! He rolled off the sled, while the Nor'wester built a fire, in order to greet his bride——"

Bruce's smothered oath interrupted.

" What? " Desirée asked.

" Nothing," he murmured, the veins of his neck swelling and nearly choking him.

" Instead," Desirée resumed, " he greeted

my pistol muzzle. Day and night since he has greeted it also."

Struck with the lightning significance of her speech, Bruce Dunvegan leaped across the intervening floor space. Like some cherished possession of his own he snatched her palms. "Desirée! Desirée!" he panted.

The danger note was in his voice, the danger fire in his look. Recklessly she met the sweet menace. Facing each other for a long minute, secret thoughts were read to the full.

"Yet you are married to him," breathed Dunvegan.

"Not in the bonds of God!" she declared.

CHAPTER XX

THE LONG LEAGUER

SHACKLED with cold, iron fetters that chilled the earth to its marrow, the mighty northland lay desolate beneath the brief sunshine, fantastic under the auroras. Past Fort Brondel the ghostly caribou hordes drifted rank on rank, coming from the foodless spaces, going where subsistence permitted. In phantom packs the wolves howled by, trailing the swift moose across the crusted barrens. Four-legged creatures which never hibernate foraged farther south where the snows were thinner. The winged terrors of the air followed them, preying as opportunity afforded. Survival was ordained for only the strong, the fierce-fanged, the predatory. Indented in the white surface of the forest aisles were ptarmigans' tracks and over these the long,

shallow furrows left by swooping owls' wings.

A homely spot of life and warmth amid this vast desolation was the post of Brondel. All the Nor'west prisoners except Gaspard Follet, Glyndon, and Desirée had been transferred in care of a strong guard to Oxford House where they were confined under very strict surveillance in the blockhouse. The men of the guard returning brought news of how Malcolm Macleod, failing to surprise Fort Dumarge and rush its stockades, was besieging the place, hoping to starve it into surrender.

Dunvegan had hastened a messenger to Macleod, informing him of the capture of Brondel. The Factor dispatched a runner back with orders for Bruce to be ready to move on La Roche when Macleod should send him word of his coming on the completion of his own project. Realizing the danger in which he stood from the overwhelming power of his own desires, Dunvegan prayed in his heart for the fall of Fort Dumarge and the advent of the Factor. He

thought he could find respite and ultimate safety in the call which would summon him to the attack of La Roche away from the lure of Desirée Lazard.

But monotonously the short days slipped into long nights, and still no word came from Malcolm Macleod. Dumarge was proving stubborn.

Nor did the tiresome fort routine offer the chief trader any relief. The unspeakable desolation all about, the inactivity, the eternal waiting, waiting for a command which failed to come, wore down by degrees the control Dunvegan had exercised over his emotions up to this stage. His pent-up passion was gradually gaining in volume. He knew that its torrent must soon sweep him away, beating to atoms the barrier of moral code which was now but an undermined protection. He was facing the certain issue, understanding the immensity of his struggle, seeing no chance of escape.

True, he contemplated asking permission of the Factor to send Glyndon and Desirée to Oxford House. But over this he hesi-

tated long, fearing that beyond his guard Black Ferguson's cunning might prevail and that Desirée might fall into the Nor'wester's grip. But finally, driven to desperation, Bruce started a runner on the trail to the beleaguering camp outside the palisades of Dumarge, requesting the transfer of the prisoners to the home post.

Fate seemed determined to torture, to tempt, to break Dunvegan. Macleod would not hear of such a proceeding. His answer was that neither Edwin Glyndon nor Gaspard Follet must pass from confinement or out of the chief trader's sight. The one-time clerk and the spy, possessing Nor'west secrets and intimate knowledge of the enemy's affairs, were captives far too valuable in the Factor's eyes to be given the remotest opportunity of obtaining freedom. When he should have extracted much-desired information from them, Macleod planned to deal them the deserts their actions had merited. Death he had decreed for Gaspard, a hundred lashes from dried moosehide thongs, a lone journey to York

Factory, and a homeward working passage on a fur barque were promised the puerile drunkard. Incidentally the runner whom Bruce had sent out mentioned the presence of two strange men at Oxford House.

"What sort of men were they?" he asked the halfbreed courier.

"W'ite mans, ver' strong," replied the shrewd breed. "Look lak dey come from ovaire de Beeg Wenipak."

And Dunvegan knew that Granger and Garfield, the hardy deputies, also awaited the success of Malcolm Macleod. Like shadows since the first had they moved across the northern reaches from obscurity to certainty, from vagueness to tangibility, omens of a coming law in the wilderness!

Also like a shadow Desirée Lazard flitted free before the chief trader in Fort Brondel. Bitter through her utter disillusionment, swept by a fire as compelling as that against which Bruce Dunvegan battled, she cared not how high ran the tide of feeling. With a woman's instinctive pride in her powers she smiled on the re-awakening

of the old love, thrilled to its magnifying intensity, responded with a half guilty ecstacy to its fierce, measureless strength.

Listening in the fort, Desirée would hear Bruce's rifle talking as he hunted through the lonely woods. It spoke to her of misery, pain, and yearning. Secretly she rejoiced. Then at night her eyes shone across to him through the birch logs' glow. Her hair gleamed like the candlelight. Her lips allured through the half-dusk surrounding the crooning fireplace.

Maskwa, the wise old Ojibway, watching them thus evening after evening as the long winter months slipped away, nodded darkly.

" Nenaubosho is working in them," he observed to himself. " Soft Eyes will lose his wife unless Stern Father comes to move us."

But Fort Dumarge, feeling the pinch of hunger, still held firm against Malcolm Macleod.

As ever the evenings came round. Desirée's spell grew stronger. The attitude of the two began to be marked by all in the fort as the curb loosened imperceptibly, but

surely. Out of hearing in the blockhouse or the trading room, the Hudson's Bay men commented on their leader's strange—to them—fight against his own inclination. A hard-bitten crowd, each followed impulse in the main. The only restriction they acknowledged was the Company's discipline. They were north of fifty-three, and they scorned the fine points of ecclesiastics. Two ruling powers they knew: red blood and a strong arm.

Because Bruce Dunvegan held the upper hand and wanted Desirée Lazard as he wanted nothing else on earth, they marveled that he did not get rid of the prisoner and marry her. Behind the screen of hundreds of miles of forest they had seen the thing done many times before, and no one in the outside world was the wiser.

"He goin' crazy eef somet'ing don' be happen," whispered Baptiste Verenne, one night when the winter had nearly run its course.

"'Tis always a woman as raises the divil," announced Terence Burke. "Oi was en-

gaged wanst meself, an' Rosie O'Shea niver gave me a minnit's peace till the day she bruk it."

"Hold on there," Connear cried. "You mean *you* never gave *her* a minute's peace. 'Twould be South Sea hell to live with you, Terence—even for a man!"

"Ye ear-ringed cannibal," returned Terence belligerently. "Divil a woman *would* live wid ye, fer she'd be turned to rock salt by yer briny tongue."

Connear stuck out the offending member beneath his pipe stem.

"No woman will ever have the chance to do it," he declared. "I've been in a few ports in my time. I've had my lesson."

"Now you spik," smiled Baptiste. "You be t'ink of dat tale you told 'bout dat native girl w'en your boat she be stop at—w'at you call?—dose Solomon Isle!"

"Yes," the ex-sailor replied. "Made love to me in the second watch and stabbed me in the back with one hand to leave the way clear for her tribe to murder the crew and loot the vessel."

"Oi didn't hear that, Peter," Burke prompted. "Go on wid it."

"Nothing to go on with," snapped Connear. "She pinked me too high up. Knife-point struck the shoulder blade, and my pistol went off before she could give the signal yell."

"An' then?" Terence was interested.

"Nothin', I said. The crew rolled out. The night was so warm that they didn't care to sleep any more. Oh, yes, and there was a village funeral in the mornin'!"

"Whose?"

"The girl's, you blockhead. Died of fever—a night attack!"

"Howly Banshees!" stammered Burke.

Baptiste Verenne crossed himself.

"So," nodded Maskwa, unmoved. "Soft Eyes might die of fever, or cold, or the Red Death!"

South winds full of strange magic ate away the snows. Blinking evilly, the muskegs laughed in little gurglings and sucking sounds. The forest pools brimmed with black water. Fresh, blue reservoirs the big

lakes shimmered, while rivers swirled in brown, sinuous torrents.

Spring! The mallards shot overhead like emerald bullets.

Spring! The geese ran a compass line across the world.

Spring! The blood of every Northerner, man or woman, rioted madly, leaping untamable as the Blazing Pine River roaring past Fort Brondel.

Through some swift necromancy the frozen wilderness turned to an arboreal paradise. Bird songs fell sweet on ears tuned to brawling blizzards. Music of rapid and waterfall seemed heavenly after the eternal hissing of the wind-freighted drifts. Hotly shone the sun, pouring vitality into the earth. Responsive the bloom came, wonderful, profligate, luxurious.

Gay as any of the mating birds Baptiste Verenne sang about the Post. And when even the veins of squaw and husky thrilled with excess of vigor, the tremendous swelling and merging of the passion that absorbed Desirée and Dunvegan could be

vaguely gauged. As surely as the glowing warmth of spring was increasing to febrile summer heat, the man was being drawn to the woman. The distance between them gradually lessened. Dumarge had not fallen.

Then from the South in the dusk of an evening came the canoe express bearing the York Factory Packet in charge of Basil Dreaulond. Since Brondel now belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company, that place had been added to the posts of call.

Baptiste Verenne sighted Basil and his bronzed paddlers far up the Blazing Pine before ever they reached the landing. Instantly Fort Brondel was in an uproar, but in accordance with the rule in troublesome times no one passed beyond the stockade to greet arrivals. The dangers of surprise was not courted.

Yet Baptiste had not been mistaken. Dreaulond and his men hailed the post cheerily.

"*Holá!*" was the cry. "*Voyez le pacquet de la Compagnie.*"

"*Oui, mes camarades,*" shouted Verenne as sentinel from the high stockades. "*Entrez! Entrez vite!*"

Joyfully Brondel received them. "*Lettres par le Grand Pays,*" shrieked the volatile French-Canadians.

Bruce Dunvegan met Dreaulond in the store where he had his office as factor of the fort.

"What news?" he questioned, gripping Basil's brown palm.

"Dumarge she be taken," replied the smiling courier.

"When?" Pain not joy filled Dunvegan to his bewilderment. He began to think that he did not really understand himself or his feelings.

"'Fore I leave," Dreaulond responded. "De Factor send de word in de *pacquet.*"

A startled, feminine cry echoed behind the men. Bruce swung on his heel. Her eyes brooding with half-formed fear, Desirée Lazard was regarding them.

The chief trader motioned her out. She did not obey.

"He has won? The Factor has won at last?" Her manner was that of a person who faces a calamity long-feared, hard-hated.

Dully Bruce nodded.

"The papers!" she exclaimed. "Open them! See when the force moves."

He broke the thongs of the packet like thread, rummaged the bundle, and found the documents directed to him.

"Macleod will be here in two days," was his answer. "Now will you go!"

The intensity of Dunvegan bordered on savagery. Desirée slipped to the door. Outwardly conquered, she disappeared, but victory still lurked in her glance.

Basil Dreaulond wondered much at the chief trader's apparent mood, for he was always gentle in the extreme when dealing with women. The courier could not know that this was the bitterness of renunciation. He too went softly away and left Dunvegan alone.

An Indian had taken Baptiste Verenne's position as sentinel, and Baptiste, hurrying

through the yard, met Basil coming out of the fort.

"Got de fiddle ready, Baptiste?" asked the tanned courier, grinning.

It was the custom at the posts to hold a dance upon the arrival of the packet. These festivals marked, as it were, the periods of relief and relaxation from the toil and danger of the long, arduous packet route.

"*Oui,* for sure t'ing," Verenne replied. "I be beeg mans dis night, *mon camarade!*"

And a big man Baptiste was as, perched high on a corner table, he drew the merry soul of him out across the strings of his instrument.

As he played, he smiled jubilantly down upon the light-hearted maze that filled the great floor of the trading room. The huge hall was decorated by the quick hands of women for the occasion. Varicolored ribbons ran round the walls after the manner of bunting and fell in festoons from the beamed ceiling. Candles stood in rows upon mantels and shelves, shedding soft, silver light from under tinselled shades. Ever-

greens were thrust in the fireplace and banked about with wild roses and the many flaming flowers of the wilderness. A sweet odor filled the air, an Eden smell, the fragrance of the untainted forest.

Riotously, exuberantly the frolic began. Blood pulsed hotly. Feet were free. Lips were ready. The Nor'westers' wives, the French-Canadian girls, the halfbreed women swung madly through the square and string dances with the Brondel men of their choice.

God of it all, Baptiste smiled perpetually over the tumult, quickening his music to a faster time, quivering the violin's fibres with sonorous volume. Mad hornpipes he shrilled out, sailors' tunes which Pete Connear stepped till the rafters shook with the clatter. Snappy reels he unwound in which Terence Burke led, throwing antics of Irish abandon that convulsed the throng. Also, Baptiste voiced the songs he loved, airs of his own race, dances he had whirled in old years with the belles of the Chaudiere and the Gatineau.

Out of sympathy for the prisoners, Glyn-

don and Follet, when all the amusement was going on above, Bruce Dunvegan had ordered them to be brought up. For the one evening they were allowed the freedom of the fort, but wherever they went two Indian guards stalked always at their elbows.

And Glyndon went most frequently where the rum flowed freest. After the abstinence imposed by confinement since the week-long debauch his thirst was a parching one. Half fuddled, he met Desirée threading her way through the crowd. He put out both hands awkwardly to bar her progress.

"What do you want?" she cried, drawing suddenly back as she would recoil from a snake.

"You," Glyndon answered thickly. "Can a man not speak with his wife?"

"Wife!" Desirée echoed. "Go find one of your halfbreed wenches. Speak with *her*!"

Disgust, contempt, revulsion were in Desirée's voice and manner. She darted aside and avoided him in the crowd.

Yet again he found her seated at a table

between Dunvegan and Basil Dreaulond where she thought to be secure. He threw his arms about her neck, attempting a maudlin kiss, but instead of meeting her full, red lips his own insipid mouth met Dreaulond's great paw, swiftly thrust out to close upon his blotched cheekbones and whirl him into a seat on the courier's other side.

"Ba gosh, ma fren', you ain' be fit for kiss no woman," Basil observed sternly. "You got be mooch sobaire first. Eh, *mon ami?* Sit ver' still—dat's w'at I said."

Inwardly flaming, Dunvegan remained immovable, as if the incident were none of his concern. But though apparently so calm he was the victim of raging emotions. The magnetic personality of the woman beside him was a poignant thing. Her propinquity proved masterful beyond belief. He could hear her heart beating under restraint; interpret the heaving of her bosom; feel the hot pulsing of her blood; read her very thoughts as her mind evolved them. Conscious of the spell which grew stronger with every minute, Bruce sat there unable to tear himself away.

Presently, seeking to divert his mind from the cause of the unrest, the chief trader opened a few bottles of aged wine which he had found in the cellars of Fort Brondel that were stored with the Nor'wester's liquor. This he had carefully kept to celebrate the first visit of the Hudson's Bay Company's packet.

The amount was not large, yet a little to each the time-mellowed vintage brought from across the seas by way of Montreal went round.

" To the York Factory packet," Dunvegan cried, proposing the toast.

Cheers thundered out, hearty, loyal, sincere. Then reverently the toast was sipped.

" And Basil Dreaulond," Bruce added. A shout this time loud with great-hearted friendliness and comradeship! Strong pride of the northland race burned in their eyes as they drank to the finest type of it, the virile courier.

Now in fullness of spirit each voiced the toast that appealed to him personally.

" Scotia!—Scots wha hae!" shrilled two Highlanders of Dunvegan's band.

"The Emerald Isle," Terence Burke roared aggressively.

"The Eagle," yelled Pete Connear. "Drat your landsmen's eyes, drink with me. To the American Eagle and the salt of the sea!"

"*La France! La France!*" Voyageurs shrieked like mad.

"Old England," stammered Edwin Glyndon, pounding the table.

"Old fren's," spoke Basil Dreaulond, with quiet modesty.

"Old lovers!" Clear as a clarion Desirée's toast rang through the din, thrilling Dunvegan by its audacity, its fervor. As consuming flames her eyes drew him, withering stout resolves, melting his will. He bent his head lower, lower, glorying in the complete confession those two swift words had made.

"Ah, yes!" called Glyndon, leering evilly, "you seem to know that toast—too well."

She sprang from her seat in a fury. He sprang from his, ugly in his mood.

"You dog!" Her nostrils quivered. "You coward!"

"And liar!" Dunvegan's menacing face eager to avenge the insult rose behind her shoulder.

Uttering a wild, inarticulate cry, Glyndon struck the scornful face of the woman. Desirée gave a little moan and fell half stunned against the table.

The Brondel men roared in anger. As one man they sprang forward with the single purpose of rending Edwin Glyndon. But Dunvegan was quicker than they. White to his lips, he had leaped at the former clerk. His first savage impulse was to strike, to maim, to kill! One blow with all his mighty strength and Glyndon would never have spoken again.

Spoken! That was it. The quick realization pierced his brain even in the moment of obsessing anger. Glyndon was a prisoner. He must be produced before Malcolm Macleod. Macleod had questions to ask of him. Dead men could not answer questions.

Thus did sanity temper Dunvegan's rage. It was only his open palm that knocked the sot ten feet across the room.

Then fearfully he lifted Desirée. She stirred at the touch. The light of a smile came into the wan face with the red weal upon it. Her fortitude permitted not the slightest expression of pain, and Dunvegan's soul went out to her at knowledge of her woman's bravery. What before had seemed to him as only his human weakness now became the strength of duty. As if she had been a child, he raised Desirée in his arms and left the gaping crowd.

A murmur ran among the men when he was gone. They scowled as Glyndon staggered up.

Came an instant's silence and the piping of a thin voice. "Now my toast!"

Everyone looked to see Gaspard Follet grinning like an ogre at the foot of the table. He thrust his owlish face over the board and shook the wine in his glass till in the light it sparkled like rubies.

"To the devil!" he chuckled.

The feasters started and sat back silent,

grave, awed by the vital significance of that last toast.

Outside the challenge of the Indian sentinel interrupted the quiet. They heard the clatter of the gates. Someone had arrived.

In the living room above the store where he had ascended on the first strange night of his coming into Brondel, Dunvegan laid Desirée on the lounge covered with fur robes. He sat by her, tenderly bathing the red weal with some soothing herbal mixture that the squaws were accustomed to brew. It relieved the pain, and she smiled up at him, her lustrous eyes innocent with their depth of love.

"By the God that makes and breaks hearts," Dunvegan breathed, "you'll never look on him again. You belong to me by first and only right of worship."

There sounded a step on the stairs. Whoever had arrived was coming up.

The door opened softly. Father Brochet stepped in.

"My son, my son," he murmured reproachfully but compassionately.

They had told him all below. He came across the room, clasping hands with Bruce, greeting Desirée parentally.

" Go to bed, child," he ordered kindly, assuming authority over the odd situation. " You look tired out. Go to bed! Bruce and I want to talk."

Wondering at her own obedience, Desirée vanished into the adjoining chamber. Marveling at his own sufferance, Dunvegan watched her go.

He turned to Brochet. " Everything unexpected seems to be happening to-night! " he exclaimed. " But I didn't think you were near. Where have you come from, Father? "

" From Loon Lake."

" You knew we had captured Fort Brondel, then? "

" Yes. The Indians gave me the news. As I was on my return jorurney to Oxford House, I thought I would pay you a call according to my promise. It seems, my son, that I have arrived very opportunely. You have ruled yourself for many months!

Are you, in one mad moment, going to lose your grip?"

He linked an arm in the chief trader's and walked the floor with him, talking, talking, priming him with the wisdom of his saner years till Desirée in the next room fell asleep to the sound of their voices and the regular shuffle of their feet.

And by dawn Father Brochet felt the pulse of victory. Something of soul-light replaced the fevered gleam in Dunvegan's eyes. Not yet had he lost his grip!

"But she must go to her uncle, Pierre Lazard," he declared. "Seeing her, I cannot keep this strength you have given me."

"Pierre is at York Factory," the priest replied. "He could not bide the post long after his niece was gone. So Macleod let him go to the Factory. He passed through my Indian camp at Loon Lake before the winter trails broke."

"So much the better," sighed Dunvegan, with relief. "There she will be safe from Black Ferguson. She can go in the canoe express with Basil Dreaulond and his packeteers."

CHAPTER XXI

BLACK FERGUSON'S WILE

BROCHET arranged it. The chief trader could not trust himself to look upon Desirée's departure with the York Factory packet. The Brondel people cheered its going, but Dunvegan was not at the landing to see. He had shut himself up in the office.

That day he brooded dismally. That night he woke from troubled sleep, thinking he saw a nightmare. But the anxious features of the priest at his bedside were real. Real also the face of Basil Dreaulond! He had a bandage on his head, stained with dried blood!

Dunvegan sat up with a jerk.

"What's wrong, Basil?" he shouted. "My God, men, speak!"

"Wan party Nor'westaires waylay de canoe express," stammered Basil. "Dey must been spyin' round de post! Got de packet an' de girl. An' takin' her to Ferguson at La Roche! Dey keel ma voyageurs, *mais* I escape, me, in de woods."

The chief trader threw on his clothes and rushed for the door.

Brochet blocked him. "What now?" the priest demanded.

"Follow and——"

"No good dat," interrupted Dreaulond. "Dey got wan whole day start. No good!"

"We have men," cried Dunvegan wildly. "We must storm La Roche."

"Be wise!" Brochet urged, half angrily. "Twice your force couldn't storm La Roche—and you know it!"

"We must try. Great God, do you think I'll leave her in that brute's power? Every Brondel man marches at once!"

"No," thundered the priest. "You won't dare! You have the Factor's order. Don't dare wreck his plan through selfish desire. In another day he will be here.

But move these men now to waste them in futile assaults and you halve his strength—you lose the Company's campaign!"

Dunvegan groaned. Well he knew that. Yet inactivity galled and tortured.

"Dey got dose prisonaires *aussi*," Basil put in.

"Are you crazed with your wound?" Dunvegan's eyes flashed.

"No. But I be see dem. Dis Glyndon an' Gaspard!"

"They were guarded," began the chief trader vehemently; "are guarded now—" but he broke off to see and to make sure.

Underground they looked into a cellar-dungeon, empty of captives. Stiff in death but without any marks of violence the Indian guards lay on the floor. Dreaulond sniffed their lips.

"Dat *diable* Gaspard geeve dem de dog-berry poison," he announced. "Mus' be dropped in dere rum at de feast las' night."

It had been the duty of the guards to apportion the prisoners their food as well as to watch them. Thus their absence had not

been marked through the day. It was evident that their escape had been effected some time after the supper and dance had ended when the Indians had succumbed to the fatal drink.

Dunvegan turned to his friends, the light of unshakeable determination on his face.

"My men are the Company's!" he exclaimed. "My life is my own! I'm going to La Roche. There may be a way. Somewhere there must be a means. Either I'll carry Desirée Lazard over the stockades or the Nor'westers' guns will riddle me."

They did not doubt him. They knew a million protests would not avail.

"An' me," cried Basil, thrilled by his courage. "I go for de *pacquet*. De Company's trippers dey ain' nevaire lost wan yet. I ain' goin' be de first, me!"

"You lovable fools," reprimanded Brochet, tears in his eyes. "You have the stuff in you that makes the northmen great. But don't go alone on this mad mission! Let me go with you. For mark this, Bruce, where your strength or Dreaulond's cun-

ning cannot prevail, my cloth may render some aid."

Thus across the chain of lakes and rivers three men went against La Roche.

Paddling Indian fashion with both elbows held rigid and shoulders thrusting strongly forward at the end of each stroke, the travelers threaded for miles the island channels of the Blazing Pine. Basil Dreaulond had the bow, Dunvegan the stern. Father Brochet sat amidships. They took advantage of the current and made rapid progress, their blades churning the water in long half-circular swirls. Skilled canoeists they accepted the aid of every shore-eddy, every rushing chute, every navigable cascade.

Down the Rapid Du Loup, a dangerous rock-split through which the river leaped rather than ran, their craft was snubbed with extreme care. The three shared the toil of portaging over to Lac Du Longe where a baffling head-wind blew.

"Ba gosh, I no lak dat, me," protested Basil, pointing to the great, white-crested

combers which cannonaded the beach. "An' look at dose storm-clouds! *Saprie!* she goin' thundaire an' lightnin'!"

But the chief trader would hear of no delay. Into the brunt of the tempest the bow was forced. Shooting the sheer wave-slopes, poising dizzily on crests where momentum raised them, rocking sickeningly in the trough of the swinging seas, the men rode in the teeth of the gale. Half way across Du Longe the thunder and lightning Dreaulond had prophesied burst with raucous bellowing, with vivid flame. The wind increased. The lake became a boiling cauldron.

Basil called upon his last ounce of reserve strength to meet the emergency. Brochet muttered as if in prayer while the leaden-backed surges lipped across the gunwales and the spume slashed across the bow. But grim as the storm-wraiths themselves Dunvegan held to his course, wet drops glistening on his cheeks, wind furies reflected from his eyes. By sunset they made the other shore, their craft ready to sink under water

which could not be bailed out fast enough.

Tired to the bone, their sleeping camp was as the camp of the dead that night. An owl hooted on the tent boughs. A big moose splashed in the shallows. A gray timber wolf growled over its kill on the shore. But nothing quickened their dulled ears till dawn, red-eyed from his yesterday revelry, stared through the spruce tops.

Then like the revolving of a treadmill came hours of monotonous straight-water paddling, intervals of tracking and snubbing, occasional poling through cross-currents, swift, transient moments of hazardous rapid-running, and the hateful, staggering grind of slippery portages.

Across the Nisgowan; across the Wakibogan; across the Koo-wai-chew! Through Wenokona, through Burnt Lake, through Lake of Stars! At Little Hayes Rapid, a half-day's paddle from Fort La Roche, came their first mishap. To Basil Dreaulond as bowsman the passage which he had often run seemed unfamiliar.

"I'm not be know dis, me," he cried as

the canoe swung for a second in the head-swirls before taking the meteor-like plunge downwards.

"You're joking," called the chief trader. His paddle urged. The craft shot forward.

"*Non,* ba gosh! Dat rock she be split wit' de frost an' de ice——" and his voice went up in an alarmed yell.

"*Diable!*" he roared. "Undaire de nose!"

A desperate thrust of his blade, a tremendous straining did not avail to clear them. The canoe bow struck a fang of submerged rock with a horrible, ripping sound. On the instant they capsized.

His lungs full of water and twin mill-races booming in his ears, Father Brochet hung limply under Bruce Dunvegan's arm as the latter struggled up the bouldered side of the shallow channel. It was the most realistic drowning sensation that he ever wished to experience. After them crawled the bedraggled courier, hauling the gashed canoe beyond the hammering eddies. Blood flowed over his temple. The battering he

had received had re-opened the wound in his head.

A sound whacking between the shoulders relieved the priest. Basil's hurt was promptly staunched with balsam gum.

"*Mon Dieu,* dat be ver' close t'ing," he commented, shrugging his shoulders.

"Aye," agreed the chief trader, regretfully eyeing the torn canoe bow. "We might guard our lives a little better. There is someone in Fort La Roche who needs them."

"*Oui,*" returned Dreaulond, with deep significance, "an' eef I know anyt'ing, mebbe she be get dem *aussi*."

"Maybe," assented the chief trader, unmoved.

The priest uttered a thankful sigh. "We are in the hands of God," he declared. "White-water or Nor'westers, it is all the same!"

Bruce made a fatalistic gesture.

"I believe you, Father; I believe you," he returned. "Nevertheless we must always aid ourselves. Let us portage to the

other end of the rapid and try to mend our canoe."

But first he fished their sunken outfit from the clear water of the channel. Brochet went down and found the paddles where they had been cast upon the sand below Little Hayes Rapid. Dreaulond pushed over a dead birch, heaping its dried husk and powdery center for a quick fire.

Then they stripped off their soaked garments and spread them upon the rocks under the perpendicular sun of high noon. There the steaming clothes dried more quickly than would have been possible before the flames. It was time to eat. The hot meal of fried fish newly caught, bannocks baked from the already wetted flour, and tea proved welcome. A pipe or two formed the dessert.

After the meal the men set about the task of mending the canoe. A long rent grinned in the right side of the bow, a bad gash that would require patience in the gumming. Basil measured it tentatively and went off into the forest to cut a strip of bark large

enough to cover the opening generously. Dunvegan melted the pitch over the fire, getting it ready to cement the patch.

Basil returned. Skilfully the two accomplished the delicate work. The patch was gummed tight. Over all they spread an extra coat of pitch for surety. Then the canoe was set aside in the shade for a space that the gum might cool and harden sufficiently against the water's friction.

The bark Dreaulond cut had fitted neatly, the gum stuck well. The finish of the thing pleased Basil. He gave vent to his satisfaction in a contented grunt as he lay back with lighted pipe among the greening shrubs and ferns.

"*Bien!*" he exclaimed. "She be carry us lak wan new *batteau.* Lak *batteaux sur* de old Saguenay—dat's long way from here, ba gosh! I see heem some nights in ma dreams, me. An' dat's w'en de trails be ver' hard an' I'm ver' tired. Onlee las' night, *mes amis,* I see dat *cher* old Saguenay an' Lac Saint Jean."

"Was St. John anything like Du Longe?" asked Dunvegan whimsically.

Basil shivered at the comparison. "*Non,*" he protested. "Du Longe wan *diable.* Saint Jean wan angel. *Par Dieu,* I be tell you, *mes camarades,* dose *lacs* an' *rivières* on ma home ain' lak dese in dis beeg *Nord. Non, M'sieu'* Brochet! Back dere I be go out for some leetl' pleasure; nevaire be t'ink of dangaire—she so peaceful an' sweet. *Mais* oop here I always t'ink dis *Nord* lak wan sharp enemy watchin' for take you off de guard, for catch you in some feex. Onlee de strong mans leeve in dis countree—you see dat. An' w'en I journey on dese *lacs* an' *rivières* an' dese beeg woods, I kip de open eye, de tight hand."

"Feeling that if you ever relax your vigilance, the North will hurl you down," suggested Father Brochet.

"*Oui,* dat's way I feel. *Mais* not dat way on ma home in de old days! Las' night I be dream I dreeft lak I used to dreeft from Lac Saint Jean down de Saguenay. From Isle D'Almâ to de Shipshaw—*oui,* an' all the way to Chicoutimi! All in ma new *batteau!*"

"And was there anyone in the bow?" ven-

tured Dunvegan softly. He was strangely moved, recalling an ancient confidence of Dreaulond's.

"*Oui,*" murmured Basil tenderly, "de *petite* Therese, *ma fille!*"

"Man, man," cried Brochet earnestly, "haven't you forgotten yet? It is years since you told us of that sorrow."

"*Non,* not w'ile I leeve," Dreaulond replied, a suspicious moisture gathering on his lashes. "She be wit' me las' night, de leetl' Therese, black-eyed, wit' de angel smile—Therese from the quiet, green graveyard on de hill of St. Gédéon."

Silently they marveled at him, this man of iron strength, but of exquisite feeling, with poetic heart and temperament, who on the edge of danger could float with the dream-conjured vision of his dead child down between the water-cooled, moss-wrapped rocks of the Saguenay.

But Basil's attitude changed swiftly as he sensed one of those northern menaces which he had mentioned minutes before. He rolled on his side and stared downstream.

"Who's dis?" His tone, low and harsh, seemed that of another person.

Bruce Dunvegan raised himself on one elbow, his face frowning in a cloud of smoke.

"A Nor'wester—curse it!" he muttered savagely. "Coming from La Roche! He cannot miss us here. For see he's on the portage. Keep a still tongue till I speak and follow my lead. There is a chance that he may mistake us."

The chief trader lay back again with an assumption of careless indifference. The other two imitated it.

Meanwhile the Nor'wester was crossing the portage with a speed and ease which showed that he was not overburdened by traveling gear. The lines of the canoe on his head bespoke a fast, light craft. His dunnage was scant.

Ascending from the shore level to the hog-back of rock which ran along parallel with Little Hayes Rapid till it dipped down to clear water at the other end, the Nor'wester glimpsed beneath the broad band of the

tump-line on his forehead the three strangers lolling beside their fire. Immediately he dropped his load, paused, and glared uncertainly. Dunvegan gave him a cheery call which reassured him.

"Knife me, but at first I was afraid you might be of the Hudson's Bay people," he laughed, coming on and depositing his canoe and luggage with their own. "Yet that was a foolish idea, for one does not see Company men so close to Fort La Roche. But your faces are strange to me!" He paused and puzzled them over. "To which of our parties do you belong? You're from the Labrador, I'll wager!"

Dunvegan took safer ground. "No," he answered. "We've come over from the Pontiac with a priest for your district. From complaints at headquarters at Montreal it seems there has been a dearth of priests since Father Beauseul died. So the Jesuits have sent you Father Marcin from the Keepawa Post."

Bruce nodded to Brochet by way of introduction, a narrowing of the eye warning

the priest to act the part. And the psuedo Father Marcin sat up and greeted the fellow gravely. It was lucky that Dunvegan had some knowledge of Nor' west affairs.

But the sight of Brochet's cloth on the Nor'wester was startling. He stared a second, emitting a great pleased laugh.

"By all the gods, a priest!" he shouted. "What good fortune! As you say, there is a dearth of priests." Again he laughed that great, pleased laugh they could not understand. "A dearth of priests!"

He thrust out a hand. "I will never be any gladder to see you, Father Marcin, than I am now. You have saved me a long paddle to Watchaimene Lake. There is one of your cloth there. I was going for him."

Brochet looked up sharply. "Who is dying?" he questioned.

"No one. It's Ferguson, our leader. He can't get a priest to marry him quick enough!"

Silence fell, a hateful, awkward, dangerous silence! Brochet looked at Dunvegan. The latter's face was a mask. The pipe

protruded rigidly from one corner of his mouth. He betrayed no emotion, but the priest's glance, falling to his bare arms, noted the quivering of the sinews.

"Why so much haste?" inquired Father Brochet, calmly assuming the task of preserving the former indifference of the atmosphere.

The Nor'wester chuckled significantly. "It is natural," he answered. "Ferguson has already waited a year in order to lay hands on his bride. For you must know she was under the guard of the Hudson's Bay till she married an English clerk in their service who was bribed to come over to the Nor'west ranks and put in charge of Fort Brondel, which has since been captured by the Company!"

"How came Black Ferguson to seize her, then?" the priest asked, drawing all possible information from the swart fellow.

"There was a feast in Brondel when the York Factory packet arrived. After the dance the English clerk escaped with a spy who was also a prisoner. Expecting that

some of our men would be lurking about spying on the fort, they sought and found them and gave them news. The clerk's wife, the lady Ferguson desired, was to go north with the canoe express to York Factory. So our men waylaid it, capturing the packet and the woman. The clerk, poor fool, thought she was being taken for himself."

"And was it not so?" cried Brochet. "They were married, you say! Does this lady lean toward bigamy?"

"They *were* married, yes," admitted the Nor'wester, with a sinister meaning. "She is now a widow."

All three men started, nearly betraying themselves. "A widow!" they echoed.

"A widow indeed! The English clerk was shot by some of the packeteers."

"Dat wan dam lie!" shouted Basil, unwarily.

"Why? What do you know?" The Nor'wester looked askance at the voyageur's vehemence.

"I see dat in your eye," Dreaulond declared, quick to recover himself. "We all

be *bon amis*. Spik de truth, now!" He winked knowingly at the dark-faced man.

"Well," began the other, sheepishly, "it wasn't in the fight, that's true. It happened afterwards. I was not with the party, but they say the English clerk stumbled over his own gun."

"Where was he shot?" Dunvegan hurled the query almost ferociously.

"In the back, I heard!"

Bruce spat an oath. Brochet gave a sympathetic murmur. The courier growled inarticulately.

"*Mon Dieu*," he muttered under his breath, "dat's wan more count for M'sieu' Ferguson, wan more hell fire. I t'ink he be need de pries' for shrive, not for marry heem. Ba gosh, I do!"

The Nor'wester was obviously growing impatient.

"I must be going back if you are ready to move, Father Marcin," he asserted, "for Ferguson will question me as to where I found you, and if he thinks there has been any lagging, I shall pay the price."

Dunvegan's head moved the fraction of an

inch in a nod perceptible only to Father Brochet. The latter quickly arose.

" I am ready to make all haste," he averred. " If I delay, I am perhaps permitting sin."

" As for you, my friends," spoke the Nor'-wester, turning to the others, " there is nothing to hinder your coming also. They will give you good cheer in La Roche. You may rest there a while and return at your leisure."

" It would please us," replied Dunvegan, " but the Pontiac is a long way from here. There is little use in adding extra miles to our labor. And Keepawa Post cannot spare us for long. We will go back."

" Your plans are your own," the Nor'-wester assented. " And I must paddle on. La Roche should see me by sunset."

They helped him launch his craft and load the duffle. Dunvegan addressed a last remark to him.

" You did not tell us," he observed carelessly, " how this lady takes your leader's haste. The story has interested me."

" She pleaded for a little time against his

eagerness," answered the Nor'wester, "and she stalls him off thus. He has given her till the priest's arrival, which time she is lucky to get! Also she is lucky to have Father Marcin!" The man's chuckle implied much.

Dunvegan's jaw tightened. His pipe broken at his lips clattered on the flinty rocks.

"It was worn!" he exclaimed.

Brochet picked up the fallen portion. Showing no sign of wear, the amber was fresh and thick. Proof of the volcanic feeling rioting in him, Dunvegan's strong teeth had bitten clear through the stem.

As the Nor'wester slipped his canoe into the water, Bruce whispered to Brochet.

"Do what you can," he begged. "We shall not be far behind you."

With ostentation the priest bade the two good-bye. The Nor'wester waved a paddle in farewell as his canoe shot round a bend. Two or three miles start Basil and Dunvegan gave him before they launched their own craft.

CHAPTER XXII

FAWN AND PANTHER

LIKE a colossal casting in bronze Fort La Roche loomed against the bloody sunset. Brochet glimpsed it for the first time with a prescience of impending evil. Couchant on the serrated headland it lay some sixty feet above river level, commanding the waterway, grinning like a powerful monster, impregnable, austere, forbidding. Strongest of all the Nor'west posts, most cunningly built, most substantially fortified, the mere thought of bringing anyone over its stockades unresisted seemed maddest folly.

The priest had in his day seen many weird-looking dens bristling with defence, smacking of wrong-doing, smelling of spilled blood. But this impressed him above all as likely to be the abode of extreme malevo-

lence. Even to enter it, he felt, would be like putting one's head into a wild beast's lair not knowing what minute it might be snapped off.

Brochet was glad at this crisis that he had never seen Black Ferguson. He rejoiced that the Nor'west leader had had no opportunity to set eyes on him, for in such a contingency he could not hope to blind the man's innate cunning and preserve his incognito. Recognition by two people he still had to fear. They were Flora Macleod and Gaspard Follet. Against this he drew up the hood of his black cassock to shade his features, formulating in his mind an excuse which embraced asthma and the dark evening mist for the moment when he should be questioned as to the cause.

Under the lee of the headland the Nor'-wester's canoe drifted. Backwatering with his rigidly held paddle, he lay to below the rivergate. A loud voice hailed them from the watchtower.

"Halloo! Who comes?"

"It is Black Ferguson himself," whis-

pered the Nor'west man to Brochet, studying the tall figure poised on the high wall. "He finds it harder to wait than he thought."

Then, lifting up his shout, Ferguson's messenger answered his leader.

"Cartienne!" he roared. "Cartienne comes. And with a priest!"

Wide swung the watergate in the space of a breath. Black Ferguson seemed to have fallen from the watchtower so quickly did he accomplish the descent. His eager face peered at them from the dusky landing.

"By all the saints, Cartienne!" he laughed, mightily pleased. "What did you use? Witchcraft?"

The messenger explained. Voluble with blessings on his good luck, Ferguson dismissed Cartienne and haled the priest off to the store, in a room above which Desirée Lazard was confined.

"No supper, Father," he joked, "till you have seen my bride-to-be. And knife me, she'll give you an appetite! I'll warrant that. After supper you shall marry us."

"Is she so fair, then?" ventured Brochet.

"Fair? I'll take my oath you saw none like her in all the Pontiac, Father Marcin. But you shall judge for yourself! Here is the place. Let me lead the way aloft."

Brochet looked round as he followed Ferguson up the stairway and saw, coming into the building with some trappers to barter goods, the familiar, hideous figure of Gaspard Follet. He swiftly turned his back and pulled the hood tighter. The spy's bellowing laugh made him flinch with the sickening feeling of discovery, but immmediately he was ashamed of the falsity of his alarm. Gaspard's mirth held no hint of wicked triumph; nothing but harsh deviltry as he stared a second upon Ferguson and the black cassocked one.

"A priest, a marriage and afterwards—h—l!" Brochet heard the dwarf cheerfully prophesy to the trappers. Again his mawkish laugh vibrated among the hewn rafters.

Above the Nor'west leader quickly crossed the room and indicated a door.

"Here, Father! Cover your eyes lest

her beauty blind you!" The tone was exultant as well as bantering.

He fumbled with the bolt, failed to shoot it, and stooped to examine, for the dark was gathering thickly so that small things could not be easily seen.

"The devil!" he cried amazedly. "It's unlocked! Now what cursed trickery is this?"

Kicked back without ceremony, the door banged and quivered. Ferguson bounded inside, the breathless priest on his heels. A single candle, burning serenely, lighted an empty room.

"Legions of fiends and devils!" blasphemed the angry Nor'wester, blundering round in sheer astonishment. "Escaped? It can't be, Father Marcin! She could not have gone through the store. My men would have seen. And yonder door, the only other way out, leads into the upper part of the fur-house where the powder is stored. It is locked! What traitor——"

The grating of a key interrupted him. Ferguson whirled at the sound. The door

he had mentioned had opened and closed softly. Flora, paler than when Brochet had last seen her and with the shadow of disappointment in her eyes, quietly broke the key in the lock. She failed to recognize the priest whose face was partly concealed by his hood.

"You—you!" Ferguson shrieked, choking with terrible wrath.

"I," she answered unflinchingly. "I told you that you would never marry her. Neither shall you! Had I been able to spirit her out of La Roche, it would have been done. Failing that, I have placed her beyond your earthly reach. You cannot kiss her living lips!"

"What! You she-fiend," shouted the Nor'wester, thoughts of evil dealing leaping into his bewildered brain, "do you dare tell me——"

But Flora stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"Don't misunderstand me," she returned contemptuously. "Go look for her in the powder-room."

At that, enlightenment swept him. He

leaped forward, madly incensed, with fists clenched to strike her. Father Brochet had just time to throw himself between.

"Softly," the priest cautioned, whispering low that the Factor's daughter might not know his voice; "you must not offer a blow to a woman. I thought a prospective bridegroom had been more gentle with the sex."

"Your pardon, Father," he begged.

But he was barely containing himself. The judgment for the woman who was his wife leaped out.

"I'll suffer you here no longer," he snarled. "Leave La Roche at dawn. That's my last word to you!"

But the gleaming devil in his eye leered back at him in the steady contemptuous gaze of Malcolm Macleod's daughter.

Downstairs in wild, inconsiderate haste the Nor'wester dragged the priest. Dark had fallen on La Roche, a deep darkness of velvety, impenetrable gloom peculiar to the North. A drifting pall of mist that beaded the stockades and dripped from the blockhouse eaves added to the intensity of the night. Suggestive of tragedy, symbolic of

disaster, prophetic of unknown calamity, the weird atmosphere chilled the men as with a breath of fatalism. Both felt it, but neither stopped long enough to analyze the feeling. Brochet attributed the odd sensation to his delicate position which in the event of discovery would become fatal. Black Ferguson thought the impression was simply attendant upon his abnormal excitement as he raced across the yard to the fur-house.

There the priest sweated with a very natural fear when they met a group of Indians who had been storing bales by torchlight. Trooping back from their work, the red gleam licking across their coppery features, Brochet saw Running Wolf, his hot-tempered son Three Feathers and others of the Cree tribe from the Katchawan.

Veering a little, the priest walked on Ferguson's right side on the edge of the ring of light. Thus he avoided encountering them fairly and escaped keen eyes that would have undoubtedly recognized him even under his muffling capote.

"*Bo' jou', bo' jou',*" the Crees grunted, and stalked on.

Into the fur-house between rows of strong-odored pelts the Nor'wester hurried through the dark with Brochet. Up the long ladder which was wide enough for both to climb abreast they hastened. Ferguson threw back the ceiling trapdoor with a resounding clang. The tableau that met the two men's eyes as they pushed up their heads was one to be stamped indelibly on their memories.

A candle gleaming beside her in a sconce on the wall, Desirée Lazard crouched behind a heap of powder kegs in the middle of the room. The top of the central keg had been broken in. The powder's black crystals shone with an awesome refratcion of light. And, white-lipped, tense-fibered, Desirée held the great pistol in her hand so that its muzzle was buried in the deadly stuff.

Her eyes lightened with recognition at sight of Brochet's colorless face in the dark square of the trapdoor's space. But, being behind Ferguson's shoulder, he placed a finger on his lips so that the girl understood and gave no sign.

First the Nor'wester cursed in helplessness and baffled anger. Then his powers of entreaty were exhausted to no betterment. His handsome, diabolical countenance was set with a rigid glare almost maniacal in distortion.

"Are you mad, girl?" he screamed, his voice more animal-like than human.

"No, but you are," Desirée retorted scornfully, "if you think to approach me. Remember! A crook of my finger and Fort La Roche goes!"

To Brochet it was splendid—the soft woman holding at certain bay the wily Nor'-wester whom none had ever baffled before. Her courage sent a glow through his own frame, but instantly he shivered at the thought that this could not last any great length of time. The situation was impossible. Yet such as it was, Desirée was mistress of it!

"The minute that you or your men show foot above those ladder rungs, I fire," she declared with an intense earnestness which the Nor'wester did not for an instant doubt.

"Your priest there may come up. But no other!"

Devil that he was, Black Ferguson began to test her nerve, prancing on the rounds upward, ever upward, showing his waist, his hips, knees, even ankles, while Father Brochet trembled for the sake of the girl. He expected every instant to hear the thunderous reverberation that would carry destruction and death. Once the Nor'west leader rose on the last rung till his boot-tops levelled the floor, balanced thus, grinning to see how little he had to spare.

The priest noted Desirée's hand whitening on the pistol butt, noted the weapon's muzzle thrusting deeper into the powder. Involuntarily his fingertips went to his ears. But the explosion did not come. Laughing a grim, satisfied laugh, Black Ferguson dropped down a rung or so alongside Brochet.

"You should not do that," the latter reproved. "A slip of your foot or a nervous quiver of the girl's hand and we would all be in Heaven!"

"You and the girl might, Father. I would be in a fitter place."

Ferguson's face was insolent. He had no fear, neither had he any reverence.

"Hard as you are," the priest went on, "I give you credit for your courage."

"Give Desirée credit too! There is a woman of steel, Father. A fit mate for a Nor'wester!"

"But most unwilling, it seems!"

"Her will must break."

Black Ferguson turned again to glimpse her fully. He played again his trick of mounting the ladder rungs.

Brochet thought the Nor'wester was baiting her out of sardonic recklessness. This was partially the truth, but had the priest followed Black Ferguson's eyes more closely, he would have seen that the cunning giant had an ulterior purpose in his baiting. Once more he dropped back to Brochet's side without betraying that purpose.

"Beautiful and brave!" he gloated. "Brave and beautiful! Did you ever see her like, Father Marcin? I'll wager not.

Not even in the Pontiac! Yet look what madness it is—this standing at bay. I don't want her destroyed. Nor the fort. She knows that. But how long can she play this pretty game? Soon she will need food, and with that she-fiend who planted her here gone, she will never get it. What then? What then, my worthy priest? You see it is no use. Go up and reason with her, Father. You have wisdom. She will listen. As for me I can wait a little longer!"

He urged Brochet through the opening and closed the trapdoor. His heavy boots clattered down the ladder. The outer door of the fur-house opened and shut.

Dropping her weapon, Desirée swayed forward on unsteady feet and, sobbing with nerve-strain, collapsed on the priest's breast.

"My child, my child," murmured Father Brochet.

And when she lay a little quieter in his arms, he whispered in her ear a word about Dunvegan and Dreaulond.

"They can't be far off," he explained. "A few miles behind Cartienne's canoe!

That would be all—just enough to keep well out of sight or sound. And I shouldn't wonder if they're about La Roche now!"

"But what can two men do?" cried Desirée, utterly hopeless. "He—he will only sacrifice himself. And for me in the end it will be this." She motioned to the powder, and then drawing away from Brochet with a return of strength went and seated herself upon the keg.

"You had—you had the pistol," ventured the priest.

"Yes," she returned quietly, "but I could not use it even on a beast. You yourself would not have me use it so, Father!"

"No, daughter, not so! Nor yet the other way—the powder! Pray God he gives Dunvegan strength to do something."

Brochet paced up and down in a distracted manner. There was little he could say. Reason with her the Nor'wester had ordered! The priest would rather see her press the trigger above the keg than reason her into the arms of the Nor'wester lord. He began to question her as to the details

of the attack upon the York Factory packet. Desirée explained how they had been waylaid, for since she was in the hands of the victors after the skirmish she could better learn how they had fulfilled their plans than could Basil Dreaulond who had escaped. She shuddered when she told of the accident to Glyndon which happened afterwards as they made speed to Fort La Roche.

For accident it was in Desirée's eyes. How could she know that the men of the party had had their orders from Black Ferguson before they departed on their mission? Father Brochet did not enlighten her.

She went on to tell of the arrival at the Nor'west stronghold, of Ferguson's greeting with his offer of marriage. Her eyes flashed as she spoke of it.

"Did you ever see a panther stalk a fawn?" she cried. "That was it! But I defied him. I scorned him. I—I spurned him. Yet defiance seemed only to increase his appetite. He laughed at my fear. He roared at my fury. He thrust me into a locked chamber to change my mind before

the priest arrived. He said I was lucky to have a priest——"

She paused, interrupted by a slight sound which seemed to come up from the river. The wall trembled never so slightly. "What is it?" she whispered.

Brochet had stepped swiftly to the other end of the powder room and laid ear to a loop-hole. Suddenly his left hand beckoned. Desirée tip-toed across.

"What?" she panted. "Who?" She breathed in little gasps.

"I don't know, daughter," murmured the priest, his voice tremulous with excitement. "Dunvegan—maybe. He swore he would carry you over these walls."

"What madness!" Desirée gasped. "Think of the cliffs. The stockades are fifty feet above the water. It would require a miracle!"

"You forget there is a God who still works miracles. And through earthly instruments! Remember the fur-chute!"

"But it is drawn up every night," the girl protested.

"To-night it cannot be, for the noise is coming from it. The Crees and voyageurs were unloading fur-bales. They have been careless and left it down. Or perhaps they have not finished. Pray Heaven they may not come back too soon!"

Undoubtedly the noise, as of someone crawling, was coming from the fur-chute, the long box-pipe of pine that projected like a spout from the lower room of the fur-house and slanted down over the stockades to within a few feet of the river's surface. It was used for the loading and unloading of pelts carried in canoes, the huge bales being hoisted or lowered by a stout rope which ran through the center on a pulley. The height of Fort La Roche above the water made such a contrivance necessary. It effected a tremendous saving of time and portaging up the steep.

The only drawback was that it afforded means of ingress to enemies, since an active man could pull himself up by the rope, and this the Nor'westers had overcome by hinging the fur-house end on a great wooden pin.

Thus at will the spout could be raised like the arm of a derrick out of reach from anyone below.

That the chute was not raised now could hardly have been an oversight. Brochet knew that Ferguson was far too careful for that. It must mean that there was still work to be done. The priest sweated at every distant echo of voice or footfall for fear it heralded the return of the Nor'west voyageurs.

The scraping, crawling noise continued. While they strained to hear, their ears tense as those of listening deer, they caught a faint metallic sound from the room downstairs.

" Bolts," muttered Brochet, straightening up suddenly. " Now what does that mean? "

He was shown! The trapdoor behind them flew open and Black Ferguson's head and shoulders rose up. He had worked the ruse of coming back unheard. In his hand the priest could see a piece of binding cord drawn taut as if fastened to something under the powder-room's floor.

"Ho! Ho!" His huge laugh reverberated among the rafters. "Ho! Ho!"

Desirée dashed toward the kegs, but the Nor'wester swiftly jerked on the cord he held. A gap yawned in the floor before her feet. Kegs and pistol tumbled down into the fur-room.

"Ho! Ho!" roared Ferguson. "It's an old trapdoor where the ladder used to be. I put a string to the bolt. What do you think of my reasoning, Father? Better than yours, what?"

He had reached the floor and was rushing across to them.

"The candle, Father! The candle!" Desirée shrieked. For keg on keg of powder, many of them open, was still up-piled around the room.

She sprang for it. Black Ferguson sprang also and wrested the flaming taper from her fingers. Still laughing, he shoved her aside with one great paw and replaced the light in the sconce on the wall.

"There's a spitfire, Father Marcin," he exulted. "There's spirit for you. It's the

spirit I want. By heaven you'll marry us now. I ask no better chancel."

And he leaped after the retreating girl.

"Wait till I get her in these arms," he cried hoarsely his cheeks aflame, his eyes shining with desire. "Else will she not stand quiet for the vows!"

Fawn and panther!—the comparison Desirée herself had made! As tawny, as cruel, as strong, and as fierce to feed as any beast of prey the Nor'wester ran round the yawning floor-gap to seize her. As slim, as supple, as tender as any fawn Desirée crouched and trembled an instant before him. Then she leaped straight down through the opening.

CHAPTER XXIII

CONQUEST

A PRAYER on his lips, Brochet scrambled down the ladder. A curse on his, Black Ferguson tumbled after. In the impetus of his descent the Nor'wester hit the trapdoor over the ladder. It slammed shut, and the place below was plunged in darkness except for the faint gleam which fell from above through the other square. The candlelight came down like a golden spray of phosphorescent liquid, bathing and making visible a meager space in the middle of the lower floor. It was only the square of light in the ceiling enlarged a few diameters, and the rest of the vast room where boxes, barrels, and bales were piled in rows on the floor and upon shelves on the walls remained black as pitch.

But Ferguson had no chance to go up and bring down the candle without which he had so thoughtlessly descended. His quarry was too close to escape.

"Do you find her, Father?" he called to the priest whom he could dimly see searching where the weak light shone.

"No! Nor hear her!" Brochet's voice was bitterly harsh. "If she struck these boxes, you have murdered her!"

"Aye; and if she struck the fur-bales, she is as lively as ever! Since you don't see her there, she didn't strike the boxes. She's in this cursed dark somewhere. What's more, she'll be out of it in a minute. Watch the door, Father. I'll stand by the fur-chute. It's down; and it's devilishly handy for her to slide into the water!"

Quickly he crossed the space of light and groped for the mouth of the chute. He reached it. The cool, dank river air rising through it puffed in his heated face.

"Wait a moment, Father. Wait till I strike a match!"

"In the name of Heaven, don't!" cried

Brochet from the door where he was secretly trying to loose the bar. "The kegs broke when they fell. The powder's all over the floor."

Black Ferguson chuckled like a fiend. "Faint-hearted, Father? Take a lesson from the girl. Powder or no powder, we must have light!"

The sulphur match crackled on the wall. Ferguson shielded the sputtering blue flame with his hands, but even while he shielded it, the match was struck from his fingers, and he was locked in a pair of powerful arms.

"Let go, priest!" he commanded laughingly. "Where in the devil did you get such muscles?" He imagined Brochet had gripped him.

But his laugh and his voice died in the strain. He could only choke out a curse and bend to his sudden mad struggle for freedom.

Over by the door Father Brochet heard the sounds of conflict, the hard breathing, heavy trampling, smashing of boxes and bar-

rels, crashing of overturned goods. He thought it was Desirée striving against the Nor'wester. He rushed to her aid, but the strong whirl of men's fighting bodies hurled him into a corner. Almost under his feet Desirée gave a frightened cry, and, stooping, the priest groped for her.

He gathered her in his arms. "Are you hurt, daughter? Are you hurt?"

"No, no," she assured him. "I landed on the fur-bales, and they were soft. But, God of Heaven, what is happening?"

"It must be Dunvegan—and Ferguson. And one will kill the other!"

In the dark they crouched back from the stamping feet. Not a thing was visible. They might have been in some medieval dungeon or charnel vault where monsters of old were writhing in death-grapples. Desirée was trembling all over. She clung to Brochet, her eyes straining for an unrewarded glimpse of the furious antagonists. If she could only see! That was what wracked her. The fear that invisible horror engenders shattered her supersensitive

nerves. On the verge of hysteria she listened, praying for the end.

Then huge as giants in the spray of light she saw two men stagger into the central space of the floor. She saw one man's body bend as willow in the other's arms, heard it crack like a broken branch. Sweeter than any sound she had ever heard, Dunvegan's voice rang clearly.

"A candle, Brochet! For Heaven's sake, a candle! It is either his neck or his back. Pray God, his neck!"

The priest's cassock flapped up the ladder and flapped down again. Fearfully he walked with the taper and held it tight; for destruction was all around them, and the trampled powder lay on the floor like meal.

"Careful, Brochet!" warned the chief trader. "This way—this way. Ah! it's his back."

Horrible to view, with his spine doubled back like the broken blade of a jackknife, Black Ferguson was crumpled over a barrel. He looked as if he could never move or speak again, and, placing the candle care-

fully on a box, Father Brochet knelt hastily beside him.

"Help me, my son," he begged Dunvegan. "Raise him up. Surely he will let me shrive him."

Shrive him! They reckoned without the Nor'wester's steel spirit. He squirmed in their hands. As he saw Dunvegan's face bent over him he snarled like a trapped wolf and uttered a demon-howl.

"La Roche!" he screamed loud enough to ring from ground to blockhouse tower. "La Roche! To me, comrades! To me——"

The chief trader's palm stopped his mouth, but the mischief was done. There arose a roar of trapper shouts and Cree gutturals. The yard thundered with running feet. Brochet rushed to bar the door. Dunvegan grasped Desirée's arm and sprang to the fur-chute.

"Quick!" he ordered. "Put your feet over the rim. Now sit down. Basil has the canoe at the other end!"

He looped the rope around the girl's waist and swiftly lowered her like a bale through

the wooden spout. Hands below suddenly eased his burden. The rope jerked twice, Dreaulond's signal that the descent was made, and Dunvegan pulled the hemp up again with feverish haste. The coils writhed and twisted on the floor behind him; the sweat of his climb and exertion ran rivulets on bare arms and forehead.

"You next, Brochet!" he panted.

But there was sacrifice in the priest's eye. Men with torches were all about the building. In a moment or two they would break in.

"Brochet! You next!"

"No, no, my son. Good-bye, and go. There is no time for both."

"You next, I said," roared Dunvegan. He leaped and seized the priest bodily.

"Leave me, son!" Brochet tried to throw off the rope. "Your place is with Desirée. They will not harm me."

Dunvegan whipped the cable over the priest's head and took a turn under his armpits. "Harm you! They would rend you bone from bone. Black Ferguson

knows you now for an imposter. Into the chute you go!"

The building shook under the assault of the trappers and Crees. The rafters rang with Ferguson's shouts as he urged the men on. Axe-blades bit through the barred door.

The chief trader put forth his strength to steady Brochet's descent. He was much heavier than Desirée, and the brunt of the drag came just when he occupied the mouth of the chute before the rope could be eased over the pulley. As the priest's head was disappearing, he cast up his eyes and Dunvegan saw spring into them an intense horror.

"Look!" he shrieked. "Look!" and vanished down the pipe.

The chief trader threw a backward glance across his shoulder as hand over hand he paid out the rope, and the sight he glimpsed turned icy cold the hot sweat on his limbs. Black Ferguson, cripple as he was, had possessed himself of the candle and was dragging his broken body along the floor toward a heap of the trampled powder. Paralysis

gripped the Nor'wester's legs so that they trailed helplessly, but by means of his tremendous strength of shoulders and arms he was wriggling his way, clutching, pulling, heaving as one in death-throes. He had the candle in his mouth, and he seemed to Dunvegan like some great, evil, fiery-tongued, crawling monster.

Outside the building all was pandemonium. Inside dwelt awful suspense. It was a moment to drive Dunvegan mad. The rope was not long enough to allow him to back up and kick the candle out of Ferguson's mouth. If he let go he would undoubtedly drown Brochet and capsize the two in the canoe. He hung on grimly, measuring the Nor'wester's progress by glancing back repeatedly, striving to pay out the cable faster than the dragon-like thing could crawl.

Foot by foot he fed the rope. As it sagged loose, Black Ferguson had gained his goal. His hand snatched the candle from his teeth and reached out to lay wick to the granules.

When he saw the Nor'wester's arm go out, Dunvegan dived headforemost down the chute. Like an otter he slid, and cried a warning as he shot down. Barely in time did Basil catch it. A backward sweep of his paddle, and a whizzing body splashed at his bow.

And simultaneous with the splash the cliffs rocked and thundered. Like a volcano the hill vomited red fire through the pitchy night. In a blotch of flame La Roche flew heavenward. A rain of wreckage fell upon the water all around the chief trader.

"*Mon Dieu, camarade,* dive!" shouted Dreaulond, backing water.

He dove and came up again in the center of the river. There the courier whirled the stern of the canoe into his grasp, and, unhurt, Dunvegan raised himself over it. The last barrier between them gone, Desirée crouched in his dripping arms.

Yet only an instant might heart beat against heart! Dunvegan thrust his legs under the stern thwart and caught up a paddle.

"Drive, Basil," he urged. "Drive hard! I don't think there's a living soul left, but we can't take any chances."

In dashed the blades, but hardly had they dipped a dozen strokes when a string of lights starred the river round the first bend.

Dreaulond swore softly. "Nor'westers, ba gosh! Some been away!"

"Hug the shore," Dunvegan whispered. "We may slip past them without their seeing us in this fog."

Paddling in silence, they worked their craft close against the rocky wall of the farther shore. Prey to mingled hope and fear, the four crouched low in the gunwales. The lights were still coming in file, and in a moment the hiding ones could see a fleet of canoes with torches in the bows. Swiftly the birch-barks skimmed the bloody streaks the torches cast on the black water. They changed their course slightly, and the leading one forged along within a few yards of Dunvegan's craft.

Discovery seemed certain. The chief trader whispered to Basil and felt for his weapons in the canoe bottom. Voices of

the oncoming men struck sharp and clear through the moist air.

"It seemed like an earthquake!" some-one was saying.

Instantly Dunvegan knew the voice—the Factor's! He dropped his weapons.

"Earthquake it sure was," a voice replied. "And the fort was on top of it. Your men have saved you the trouble of a siege, Mac-leod. They sure got to the powder!"

The pulses of the four leaped gladly. Now in the nebulous torch-glare they could make out the faces and figures in the fore-most craft. There in the bow was Wah-biscaw, and behind him Malcolm Macleod. Amidships Dunvegan saw Granger, the sandy-haired deputy he had met on Lake Lemeau and again at Kabeke Bluffs. Aft was his swarthy, black-bearded companion, Garfield. In his place as steersman squatted wise old Maskwa.

The keen-visaged Granger was casting piercing looks on all sides as they plunged on. He timed his paddle strokes with an oft-repeated phrase.

"They got to the powder; they sure did!"

And Garfield's white teeth split his black beard. "Yes, and where in thunder are they now?"

"Here," laughed Dunvegan, and from the gloom drove alongside them. "Here. Keep down those guns!"

Granger, ever quick to defend, lowered his arms. "By the hinges of hell!" he exclaimed. "You sneaked? You got to it and sneaked? Oh, what a jolt! Oh, Lord, what a jolt!"

All around the other canoes glided up. The chief trader looked on the faces of the Oxford House and Brondel men. The haggard, strained look in their eyes told of paddling night and day from Fort Brondel. And they had nearly made it! Dunvegan thanked God they hadn't.

As for the Hudson's Bay forces, they stared at the four in the canoe as at people escaped from the Pit. But the Factor stirred them from immobility.

"Ashore!" he ordered. "Ashore! Search the hill!"

"I'm afraid there's nothing to be found," observed Dunvegan, "except perhaps a few wretches to be put out of their misery. I guess there were tons of powder."

"How'd it happen?" Macleod demanded, as side by side their two canoes nosed in to shore through the channel where the watergate was blown to atoms.

"Ask Brochet. He was there from the first. He can tell you more than I."

So between Macleod and Granger, as they climbed the twisting path cut through rock to the landing by the watergate, the priest walked, outlining what had taken place. Behind them, with Dunvegan and Garfield, toiled Desirée. She would not be left alone below. Maskwa and Wahbiscaw had gone ahead with the rest of the Hudson's Bay men.

As they reached the top, Brochet finished his brief account of the affair in the furhouse.

The Factor took it in silence. Not so Granger!

"The game old devil!" he cried. "He

sure kept his nerve to the last. But he has made himself thunderin' hard to identify. Eh, Macleod? I guess you can't swear to his identity now!"

"You should have arrested him as soon as you placed him at La Roche," the Factor answered. "And found me afterwards."

"Don't talk nonsense! We'd look fine playing a single-handed game like that, wouldn't we? It had to be worked a different way. You both had assumed names. We didn't know which was which. So we had to nail our plan in the middle and let it swing at both ends. You see how it swung? If we had to take you, the Northwest Company would fight for us. If we had to take Ferguson, the Hudson's Bay Company sure was at our backs! Good Lord—what's here? A quarry?"

A quarry indeed it looked, a huge, black cave amid the rocks, the heart of the granite headland blown out by a titanic blast. They stood on the edge of the slope, gazing at the torches of the Hudson's Bay men as they swarmed like gnomes in the bowels of the

pit. They clustered and spread and crawled here and there, round the sides of the chasm, up over its lips, where ghostly as bale-fires little heaps of wreckage smoldered and flamed.

Then the reluctant lights came back one by one, and the tale of the bearers ran the same.

"Nothing!"

"Not a body!"

"Not a limb!"

Like a funeral bell Brochet's voice broke the grim silence. "Gone? All gone? And unshriven! God rest their souls." He knelt on the rocks.

While he muttered a prayer, Maskwa strode out of the dark. He had no torch, but he held something in his hands. Startled, the others craned and peered. A dozen torches flashed over the Ojibway, and in his arms the crimson light played upon a crumpled form.

"He breathes, Strong Father!"

Dunvegan sprang to one side of the burden, Granger to his other. As they placed

the mangled figure on the ground the head came by chance upon the priest's knees.

"Ferguson!" Brochet whispered, awed. For though limbs and body were crushed and torn, the face remained unmarred.

"Aye, and a job for you," murmured Dunvegan.

But Granger had leaped at the name, dragging Macleod by the arm.

"Look!" he urged. "Look! Will you swear to him?"

The red glare bathed the white face. The Factor's eyes focused on the features and grew full of terrible light and would not come away.

"It's—it's—Funster," he choked.

Dunvegan saw his right hand clench and clutch the air. He held an imaginary weapon. The old scar was ripped from his heart. He was the primeval man, red with rage, thirsting for revenge, and baited blind because vengeance had been torn from his grasp.

And as if under the electric prick of his tense words the Nor'wester stirred.

He muttered once and opened his eyelids. Straight up into Macleod's awful face he stared, and his eyes suddenly gleamed with recognition.

"My son—my boy?" demanded the Factor hoarsely.

The Nor'wester's lips strove a little and parted.

"Gaspard!" he groaned with his last breath.

THE END

